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VIRTUE IN PRACTICE
ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S CONCEPT OF
VIRTUE

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INTRODUCTION

Alasdair MacIntyre has been at the forefront of the resurging interest in virtue theory. His seminal work *After Virtue*¹ provided a tremendous impulse in this direction. First published in 1981, it proposes a return to Aristotle amid the incommensurability and fragmentation of contemporary moral theory. Since *After Virtue*, MacIntyre has maintained his central proposals, while his candid openness to criticism has led to revisions of many aspects of his theory. MacIntyre, in a 1991 conference, sums up his whole philosophical project in three parts.

The first part consists of his early years and his varied philosophical interests:

The twenty-two years from 1949, when I became a graduate student of philosophy at Manchester University, until 1971 were a period, as it now appears retrospectively, of heterogeneous, badly organized, sometimes fragmented and often frustrating and messy enquiries, from which nonetheless in the end I learned a lot.

The second part refers to a self-criticism and reformulation of his ideas:

From 1971, shortly after I immigrated to the United States, until 1977 was an interim period of sometimes painfully self-critical reflection.

The final part is what may be called the *After Virtue* project:

From 1977 onwards I have been engaged in a single project to which *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* are central.²

The goal of this dissertation is principally to answer the following question: how does MacIntyre's unique understanding of virtue, particularly situated within his concept of practice, both solve the problem of moral incommensurability and withstand key objections that have been leveled against it? To achieve this, the structure of this work will be divided into three parts. The first part will deal with a conceptual analysis of the term practice which is central to MacIntyre's understanding of virtue, that is, with the problem that practice seeks to provide a

¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2007.

² IDEM, "An Interview for *Cogito*", in K. KNIGHT (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1998, 268, 269.

response to, its key elements, and a look at its philosophical-historical sources. As the focus of this section will be primarily on MacIntyre's early work, one will discover that *After Virtue* was indeed a long time in the making, offering a comprehensive solution to the problems and questions which MacIntyre has always been concerned with.

The second part will seek to offer the heart of MacIntyre's proposal of the nature of the virtues in *After Virtue*, following the three stages that MacIntyre lays out in defining virtue, namely, within practice, within the narrative unity of an individual life, and within a moral tradition.

The final step will be analyze a few of the key critiques that have been made regarding the limitations and implications of defining virtue within practice. In light of these objections, the possibility of an adequate response and solution will also be explored. In this respect, one must keep in mind that MacIntyre has continued to develop the concept of virtue in his later works in two crucial ways. First, he explains the intimate relation between a theory of practical reasoning and a theory of the virtues in his work *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*.³ Second, he shows how to become an independent practical reasoner through virtues of acknowledged dependence which serves to unite his theory to a biological understanding of man. This is treated in his work *Dependent Rational Animals*,⁴ and is an important clarification to his well-known critique of Aristotle's metaphysical biology.

This itinerary, in short, is meant to lead to a greater understanding of what MacIntyre means by defining virtue in practice, how the concept practice originated, and how this theory has developed and withstood diverse objections. The final hope is to offer prospective directions that this theory can take in order to achieve greater theoretical consistency and force.

³ A.C. MACINTYRE, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1988.

⁴ IDEM, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Open Court, Chicago, IL 1999.

I. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM PRACTICE

Before entering into the nature of the virtues as such, a preliminary examination of the concept of practice is of primary importance. This analysis will also clarify many of the various philosophical elements present in MacIntyre's thought and reveal how this thought gradually developed and found its first systematic expression in *After Virtue*. This brief examination is indebted principally to Thomas D'Andrea's work *Tradition, Rationality and Virtue*⁵ and to Christopher Lutz's book *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*⁶, both of which provide an in-depth analysis of the roots of MacIntyre's thought in general through contact with MacIntyre's articles as their primary source. The scope of this dissertation will be limited especially to those articles which reveal the developing nature of practice.

MacIntyre offers his fully developed definition of practice in *After Virtue* where he says the following:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.⁷

There are three key questions that need to be asked in order to grasp the meaning and extent of MacIntyre's term practice. First off, what problem is MacIntyre trying to solve? It may be argued that this problem is the uniting factor of the whole of MacIntyre's thought.

⁵ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre*, Ashgate Pub. Ltd., Aldershot, England 2006.

⁶ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, Continuum, New York 2012.

⁷ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*..., 187.

Second, and related intimately to the first, what is at the root of this problem? Only when this question has been adequately answered can we understand the solution that MacIntyre offers in *After Virtue* and continues to develop in subsequent works.

Finally, what are the philosophical sources that MacIntyre draws from in his formulation of the term practice? One hopes in this way to grasp the nuances of this term by analyzing the diverse currents of thought that influenced its development.

A. The problem practice seeks to solve

From the outset, MacIntyre's principal preoccupation is evident – an ever growing dissatisfaction with the contemporary moral dilemma. In his MA thesis, *The Significance of Moral Judgments*⁸, this theme is at the center. As D'Andrea says, "From the MA thesis onward he is gripped by a sense of inadequacy of the dominant styles of English-speaking ethical theory, and working primarily within the idiom of Oxford ordinary language philosophy, he is attempting to formulate an alternative to supplant these."⁹

The principal problems of contemporary moral theory are found in the proposals of moral emotivism and intuitionism, theories MacIntyre would later brand as the inheritors of the Enlightenment tradition.¹⁰ In *The Significance of Moral Judgments* the tone is diagnostic, the problem being detected and described, while the search for a solution will continue to progress in his subsequent articles. Only in *After Virtue* will a comprehensive diagnostic be formulated which offers a description of the contemporary moral crisis, how it occurred, and why it is insufficient; the articles following *The Significance of Moral Judgments* must therefore be seen as a working toward that solution.

⁸ A.C. MACINTYRE, *The Significance of Moral Judgments*, University of Manchester Library, Manchester, MA Thesis 7580.

⁹ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 3.

¹⁰ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 114.

MacIntyre, from his MA thesis until his first extensive work, *The Short History of Ethics*¹¹, focuses primarily on describing what moral philosophy is not. In other words, how not to conduct ethical inquiry. Here one can see a point that is related to the concept of practice; namely, moral theory is primarily about action. Action cannot be seen purely in an abstract manner, but rather must always be seen in its practical context. Hence, there is a relation between action and practical problem-solving. To forget this is to miss a key aspect of moral theory, drastically and fatally separating it from lived moral experience. This theory-praxis relation will be a continual concern throughout MacIntyre's philosophy.¹²

Summing up *The Significance of Moral Judgments*, a key point needs to be highlighted; namely, contemporary moral philosophy offers no criteria by which one can determine the moral value of his practical judgments. How can one know if this specific action in these circumstances is good or bad? Still more, how can one determine which is the better of two actions in a given circumstance? What gives one a good reason to do this rather than that? These are the questions that MacIntyre seeks to offer a solution to, a solution that will be centered on his concept of practice.

The dissatisfaction with contemporary moral theory expressed by MacIntyre was by no means an isolated case. His MA thesis was written in 1951. In 1958 G.E.M. Anscombe wrote her pivotal article *Modern Moral Philosophy* which gives a clear formulation of the crisis. She states the following three theses, highlighting the need for a philosophy of psychology, the lamentable fragmentation of moral duties, and the similarities of the moral theories from Sidgwick to the present.¹³

Anscombe's proposal would become central for many, including MacIntyre, who found a similar discontent and sought an alternative direction to moral theory.

¹¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2007.

¹² T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 4.

¹³ Cf. G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy* 33, No. 124 (1958), 1.

The decades following this publication, in fact, saw a renewed interest in virtue and natural law theory as just such an alternative.

B. The roots of the problem

A diagnosis of the problem is only a first step. For a true grasp of what is at stake, the root cause of the problem must be made evident in order to formulate a proper solution; this is what MacIntyre is after. In the articles published after *The Significance of Moral Judgments*, he continues his phenomenological analysis of moral judgments, but with a notable difference – the important aspect of historical context begins to surface as an essential factor of understanding moral concepts. This is evident particularly in the context of a debate on the foundations of Hume’s moral theory. Perhaps the clearest formulation of this development is made in the article *Hume on “is” and “ought”*.¹⁵ The central question is how to interpret Hume’s declaration that ‘ought’ statements cannot be derived from ‘is’ statements, that is, concerning the possibility of deriving moral values from empirical facts. Alongside the various arguments laid out, the issue of historical context comes to the fore. This is seen in the conclusion to this article where MacIntyre offers what D’Andrea calls a “thumbnail sketch of things to come in MacIntyre’s ethical writings.”¹⁶ It is worth analyzing MacIntyre’s process of argumentation which is characteristic of his later works.

MacIntyre begins by highlighting characteristics of the morality in early Greece, especially the intimate connection between virtue and desire:

One way of seeing the history of ethics is this. The Greek moral tradition asserted—no doubt with many reservations at times—an essential connection between ‘good’ and ‘good for’, between virtue and desire.

He then proceeds to show the differences in the theological perspective of the Middle Ages:

¹⁵ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, “Hume on ‘is’ and ‘ought’”, in A.C. MACINTYRE, *Against the Self-images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2001, 109–124.

¹⁶ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 21.

Morality, to be intelligible, must be understood as something grounded in human nature. The Middle Ages preserves this way of looking at ethics. Certainly there is a new element of divine commandment to be reckoned with, but the God who commands you also created you and His commandments are such as it benefits your nature to obey. So an Aristotelian moral psychology and a Christian view of the moral law are synthesized even if somewhat unsatisfactorily in Thomist ethics.

Then comes the dividing moment of the Protestant Reformation which proposes a new vision of man and God:

But the Protestant reformation changes this. First, because human beings are totally corrupt their nature cannot be a foundation for true morality. And next because men cannot judge God, we obey God's commandments not because God is good but simply because he is God. So the moral law is a collection of arbitrary fiats unconnected with anything we want or desire.

Hume and Kant can be seen as natural outcomes of the Protestant position:

Against the Protestants, Hume reasserted the founding of morality on human nature. The attempt to make Hume a defender of the autonomy of ethics is likely to conceal his difference from Kant, whose moral philosophy is, from one point of view, the natural outcome of the Protestant position.¹⁷

One can glimpse in this conclusion a theme which will appear time and again in MacIntyre's works – a placing of ethical theories and concepts in their historical context in order to fully understand them. This will find its first full expression in *The Short History of Ethics*. In this book, he will follow an outline that will become familiar and more complete in his later works, most notably *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*. He begins by declaring the importance of the history of moral concepts saying, "Moral concepts are embodied in and are partially constitutive of forms of social life."¹⁸ This is the very point which modern and contemporary theorists have neglected; they have thus committed a fatal mistake.¹⁹ This insight that moral concepts are constitutive of the forms of social life will be fully developed by what he later defines as practice.

One may raise the objection here that, admitting that moral concepts are partially constitutive of, and embodied in, forms of social life, they may still be distinguished from those practices and considered in abstraction from them. This

¹⁷ A.C. MACINTYRE, *Against the Self-images of the Age...*, 123, 124.

¹⁸ IDEM, *A Short History of Ethics...*, 1.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

objection has its ultimate root in the question of what the subject matter of ethics is. Lutz makes this evident when he comments on MacIntyre's rejection of contemporary moral theories, "The shifts from meaning to use and from theory to practice take a decisive step away from the problems of modern philosophy by turning from epistemology—the study of knowledge—to action."²⁰

The virtue tradition that MacIntyre is arguing for, that of Aristotle and Aquinas, is based on seeking excellence in human action and agency, whereas Enlightenment moralists and their successors sought to justify rules. These two radically different approaches rest on two fundamentally opposing visions of man – the Enlightenment vision of man as having dangerous and evil desires and needing moral rules, and even virtues, to curb his desires, versus the Aristotelian vision of man as a virtuous agent who creatively uses all his faculties, including his desires, in pursuit of the good. Hence, to a certain degree moral concepts may indeed be analyzed as abstracted from practices, but to limit morality to this analysis of moral concepts and rules would be dangerously incomplete, since their ultimate meaning can only be seen in terms of human action, human ends and human purposes.²¹

Short History then proceeds with a pre-philosophical analysis of what is meant by good and how the historical transition was made from pre-philosophy to philosophy. As was already mentioned, MacIntyre sees a need to connect philosophy with lived experience. By making a pre-philosophical analysis here, he does just that. How do ordinary people understand what is meant by good? Philosophy, particularly moral inquiry, in his view, always has a connection with these questions of the ordinary man. He makes reference to this numerous times throughout his writings, for example, in the preface to *After Virtue* where he says, "The notion that the moral philosopher can study the concepts of morality merely by reflecting, Oxford armchair style, on what he or she and those around him or her say and do is barren."²²

²⁰ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 91.

²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 150.

²² A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, xvii.

When these questions begin to be answered in a systematic way, one begins to enter the realm of philosophy properly speaking, yet the connection is never lost. The pre-philosophical concept of good is first examined in the context of Homeric society, at least inasmuch as we have access to that society through the Homeric poems. Good, or *agathos*, in Homeric society was specifically attached to a social role such as that of a warrior or a farmer. A warrior was good insofar as he fulfilled his role with excellence, or *aretē*. In the same way, the warrior or king would fail when, and only when, he failed to fulfill what his role required of him. Thus, roles define the duties and obligations in Homeric society and become the common standard by which actions are judged. Here another glimpse of the concept of practice can be seen – the idea that one’s role in society is an impersonal standard by which one can judge good or bad actions.²³

The transition to a philosophical or systematic way of understanding the good would be found in Athens in the fourth-century BC. MacIntyre sees Plato, and especially Aristotle, as the ones who give the most complete understanding to the questions of the nature of good as understood in the Homeric context of which fourth-century Athens was an heir. As D’Andrea says:

Plato and Aristotle have taught us to look beyond our untutored desire and beyond conventional understandings of the good life to an impersonal standard for the good life: one which would provide us with impersonal reasons for actions and a means of ranking our desires.²⁴

This being said, one can begin to see how MacIntyre begins to favor the Aristotelian theory, though, in *Short History*, he still has numerous reservations. The important point to take away from this early treatment of Aristotle is the idea of the unity of life and an overarching teleological vision. From this point of view, one can also see the relation of moral rules to man’s natural ends, and of virtue to a good life.²⁵

²³ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *A Short History of Ethics...*, 4-9.

²⁴ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

MacIntyre is now asserting that the problems of contemporary moral theory are the result of removing moral concepts from their historical and social context. He seeks to give answer to how the promising vision proposed by Aristotle, which was incorporated into Christianity, fell apart. With these reflections, MacIntyre is not trying to write a philosophy of history, pace Robert Wokler²⁶, but rather he is after the root cause of the crisis. D'Andrea argues, "What MacIntyre has clearly been after is an explanation of how and why the pre-modern ways of thinking about ethics and the good life [...] have lost their sway over so many in the Western tradition."²⁷

Consistent with the social and historical nature of moral concepts, MacIntyre sees the transformation of morality in modern philosophy as linked to a transformation of society. For Plato and Aristotle, ethical reflection took place in the horizon of the city-state, or polis. Christianity adapted this horizon to that of natural law which was the unitive element for all men who seek their ultimate end in God. The emergence of individualism would drastically change the situation, and though the moral concepts such as good, just, and right would remain, they were no longer at home in their original contexts in which they were intelligible; only fragmented concepts remain.²⁸ This fragmentation would be a gradual process and pass through ethical theories of the likes of Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Hutcheson and Stevenson. Each one of these authors is treated at some length in the *Short History*, but to analyze the treatment of each in detail is beyond our present scope.

There still remain, however, at least two points worth mentioning before moving beyond *Short History*. First, it is relevant to accentuate what MacIntyre sees as a positive aspect of Hegel, namely, the historicity of the virtues. In other words, different sets of virtues are necessary for one to flourish in different social settings.

²⁶ Cf. R. WOKLER, "Projecting the Enlightenment", in J. HORTON - S. MENDUS (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1994, 108–126.

²⁷ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 29.

²⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 1.

MacIntyre will incorporate this aspect into his future work.²⁹ Second, he sees Kierkegaard as a crucial step on the path to emotivism since Kierkegaard has made the individual an ultimate, unanalyzed category. Kierkegaard's ethical subject is faced with a choice between the aesthetic life and the ethical life, with no rational criteria to guide his choice. MacIntyre says in this regard, "Kierkegaard moves uneasily between speaking from within an order in which God's will provides criteria for action and speaking as the lonely individual outside all criteria."³⁰

Concluding *Short History*, MacIntyre sets forth a program for his future work: to describe the contemporary moral crisis, to critique prominent attempts to solve the crisis that have been proposed so far, and to lay out the plan for an adequate solution. D'Andrea summarizes the contents which this agenda will include:

[...] a description of our contemporary moral predicament; a meta-critique, as it were, of various modern attempts to resolve the predicament; a list of desiderata for a new ethical theory, and finally, a set of unresolved theoretical problems to be tackled by a new re-constituted ethical theory.³¹

Moving on to other indicative writings, the concept of practice begins to fully develop as an attempt to provide a cogent ethical theory which avoids the fatal errors of contemporary morality that MacIntyre has diagnosed.

MacIntyre addresses the contemporary ethical social context directly in his article *How Virtues Become Vices: Values, Medicine and Social Context*³², and shows how certain ethical problems seem to have no solution since there is no rational criteria by which one may decide between rival moral views. He declares that the social order must be founded on core virtues, even though these may be understood differently from culture to culture. The fundamental virtues he names are those such as truthfulness, justice and courage. Do these virtues in themselves

²⁹ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 40.

³⁰ A.C. MACINTYRE, *A Short History of Ethics...*, 140.

³¹ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 47, 48.

³² Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, "How Virtues Become Vices: Values, Medicine and Social Context" in H.T. ENGELHARDT – S.F. SPICKER (eds.), *Evaluation and Explanation in the Biomedical Sciences*, Vol. I, Series in Philosophy and Medicine, Boston, MA 1974, 97-111.

provide the moral code for society? MacIntyre is aware that such a list of core virtues is not enough in itself to act as a universal standard. Such a list must itself be founded on a teleological vision, giving a unified interpretation of human existence. This is precisely where contemporary society falls short. How to overcome this problem is not developed in this article, but it is a preview of what is to come in *After Virtue*.³³

In the article *Patients as Agents*, MacIntyre significantly offers what may be called his first developed doctrine of practice: in order to make rational progress in the ethical debate, new forms of social community must be built where the pursuit of the good-life-for-man is at the center, thus offering a veritable hierarchy of goods. MacIntyre asks one to consider a culture thus constituted:

Consider a culture where there is a clear and established view of the good for man and where there is a rational consensus on the hierarchy of human goods.

Within this culture, practices are ordered in terms of the goods they are geared towards, and the virtues are the means by which these goods are achieved:

The variety of human practices is normatively ordered in terms of the goods which are internal to them and for each practice there is a profession specifically entrusted with the pursuit of that good and with the cultivation of those virtues necessary to achieve it.

Various elements of society such as labor and distribution of power are organized on this basis:

There is a moral division of labor and each part of the society has to repose trust in the other. [...] The distribution of powers is justified by the relationship of professions, goods, and virtues.³⁴

This is the type of community that must be created in the midst of a pluralistic culture; practices are the ways in which goods are sought. Here one can clearly see what will later be a crucial distinction between internal goods and external goods, between goods of excellence and goods of efficiency.

³³ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 57–59.

³⁴ A.C. MACINTYRE, “Patients as Agents”, in S.F. SPICKER - H.T. ENGELHARDT (eds.), *Philosophical Medical Ethics: Its Nature and Significance*, Boston, MA 1977, 206.

In the years leading up to *After Virtue*, MacIntyre begins to see many ethical problems through the prism of practice, understanding practice, of course, as that from which moral normativity derives. The moral significance of the individuals action, in this sense, will no longer be based on an autonomous choice, such as that promoted by individualism, but rather on one's role within a particular practice.³⁵ Here again one sees the importance of roles which were essential in Homeric society. He will also offer a compelling analysis of the concept of rights in the context of practices, a foreshadow of his critique of rights based solely on positive law.³⁶

At this point MacIntyre's project is well underway, and the numerous aspects of his thought are coming together to form a comprehensive solution. Before moving on to that solution as such, his prime philosophical interests need to be examined. This will shed light on the precise meaning of practice by making evident the sources that have influenced its development.

C. Influences underlying the concept of practice

D'Andrea points out the four general roots of MacIntyre's thought: the attempt to reconceive ethical inquiry, the urgency of linking theory to praxis which is directly linked to the influence of Marx, the rational resources of Christianity, and an adequate explanation of human action.³⁷ The first of these roots has just been examined above; it remains to be seen how the other three underlie the concept of practice.

First, how did MacIntyre's interest in Marx influence the development of practice? The role of Marx in MacIntyre's philosophy is evident and has received

³⁵ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 70.

³⁶ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, "The Right to Die Garrulously", in E. MCMULLIN (ed.), *Death and Decision*, American Association for the Advancement of Science Selected Symposium 18, Westview Press, Boulder, CO 1978, 76.

³⁷ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, v.

extensive treatment over the past years³⁸. MacIntyre was, in fact, a member of the Communist party in his early years, and shows his fascination for Marx in numerous articles from early on in his career. For example, at the beginning of his book *Marxism: An Interpretation*, written when he was only twenty-three years old, he quotes R.G. Collingwood who says, “Marx’s philosophy would necessarily [...] appear nonsensical except to a person who, I will not say shared his desire to make the world better by means of a philosophy, but at least regarded that desire as a reasonable one.”³⁹

Although ultimately he would find Marxist ideology to be an unsatisfactory solution, he does retain that there is much to be learned from Marx. D’Andrea says, “MacIntyre’s enthusiasm for Marxism will abate by the late 1960’s, owing to his abhorrence at the consequentialistically justified political atrocities of the Marxist regimes, but his esteem for much of what he will identify as the core of Marx’s thought will remain.”⁴⁰

On this point, Lutz makes a poignant distinction between two components of Marxism – a critique of the capitalist social order and a political socialist project. MacIntyre would take inspiration from the critique of capitalism and liberal individualism, but would have reservations as to how the social transformation should be achieved.⁴¹ A crucial article in this regard is MacIntyre’s *The “Theses on Feuerbach”: A Road Not Taken*.⁴² MacIntyre joins forces with Marx by placing emphasis on the social nature of man in order to combat the modern individualist vision where there is “a cleavage between how human beings really and essentially

³⁸ Cf. M.C. MURPHY, *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003; P. BLACKLEDGE - N. DAVIDSON, *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974*, Brill, Boston 2008; P. MCMYLOR, *Alasdair MacIntyre, Critic of Modernity*, Routledge, London 1994; T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue*.

³⁹ A.C. MACINTYRE, *Marxism: An Interpretation*, SCM Press Ltd., London 1953, 37.

⁴⁰ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 87.

⁴¹ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 12.

⁴² A.C. MACINTYRE, “The ‘Theses on Feuerbach’: A Road Not Taken”, in C.C. GOULD – R. COHEN (eds.), *Artifacts, Representations, and Social Practice: Essays for Marx Wortofsky*, Kluwer Academic Publishing, Dordrecht 1994, reprinted in K. KNIGHT (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1998, 223-234.

are and how they understand themselves to be.”⁴³ When civil society becomes a social order in which man can neither understand himself nor his relationships to others, one is left with the illusions which Feuerbach diagnosed. MacIntyre says, “The only remedy for such an illusion is an alternative form of practice of just that kind which we have already seen to be incompatible with the standpoint of civil society.”⁴⁴

This alternative form of practice is the heart of what MacIntyre gleans from Marx who himself proposed a solution of revolutionary and social practice. In fact, Kelvin Knight says, “MacIntyre has never abandoned Marx’s idea of revolutionary practice.”⁴⁵ Yet, this is precisely the road not taken to which the title of MacIntyre’s essay refers. Lutz summarizes the two distinct paths taken by Marxists:

Marxist philosophers have followed two paths: the road of Engels and Plekhanov and the road of Lukács. Marxist theorists took no interest in the standpoint of social practices as a resource for ethics because they viewed it as an expression of the arbitrary “attitudes and interests of those involved in practices.”

Thus, there remains a third path which Marx proposed but abandoned. This is the path MacIntyre will take and which becomes the primary source of his theory of practice:

For MacIntyre, however, the standpoint of social practice is the road not taken that leads through the study of human action to the discovery of objective conditions for excellence in human agency.⁴⁶

In the 1995 introduction to *Marxism and Christianity*, written as a revision of *Marxism: An Interpretation*, MacIntyre further develops Marxist elements which he retained and which contributed to the solution he proposes in *After Virtue*.

The first aspect MacIntyre salvages is the need to understand man’s life as a whole, that is, the need for an integral vision that contains nature, man’s place

⁴³ A.C. MACINTYRE, “The ‘Theses on Feuerbach’: A Road Not Taken”, 229.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ K. KNIGHT, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*, Polity, Cambridge 2007, 122.

⁴⁶ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 33, 34.

within it, the historical transformations that man has undergone, and the hope for a better society in the future.⁴⁷ In this light, he shares with Marx the conviction that the practical goal of philosophy is to improve man's condition and takes inspiration from Marx's treatment of community, as well as his explanation of man's alienation from nature, other men, and between social classes. In MacIntyre's essay *Marxist Mask and Romantic Face: Lukács on Thomas Mann*, he argues that alienation should be understood in relation to man not being able to pursue his genuine ends when his ends are often imposed on him by society. Man in this condition is unable to inquire into, let alone attain, the good and best life since his life is not seen as a unified whole.⁴⁸ This theme of disunity of life will be more clearly developed later in *After Virtue*, but it is already evident that MacIntyre is committed to a vision of man as intelligible in a teleological context which unifies his life and action. In this vein, he also sees secularization as a fracturing, inasmuch as man's action is separated from reference to its end. In other words, contemporary society has reordered society in a pragmatic way without reference to its moral ends. The concept of practice later developed in *After Virtue* has its seeds in these early reflections. As will be further expounded below, man, by his participation in the established practices of society, seeks ends and goods which are internal to those practices.

Another aspect that MacIntyre retains from Marx was already mentioned above, that is, his critique of the capitalist social order. He calls the period of nascent capitalism a source of injustice which arises from a situation of tremendous inequality and which is a result of acts of force and fraud which further degraded human beings.⁴⁹

This criticism has been a constant concern for MacIntyre. M. Murphy makes the following remark:

⁴⁷ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 394.

⁴⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, "Marxist Mask and Romantic Face: Lukács on Thomas Mann", in A.C. MACINTYRE, *Against the Self-images of the Age...*, 60–69.

⁴⁹ Cf. IDEM, *Marxism and Christianity*, Duckworth, London 1995, ix.

MacIntyre's allegiance to this view of the destructive character of the institutions of capitalism, including the modern bureaucratic state, has remained entirely unaltered to the present day; it is, MacIntyre has acknowledged, one of the few points on which he has not held different views at different point is his academic career.⁵⁰

This critique also becomes the base for MacIntyre's proposal for a society or community in agreement about the ends of action – ends not merely instrumental, as utilitarianism would have it, but ends of intrinsic value. In his article, *Against Utilitarianism*, he vouches for a democratic culture which promotes values of critical inquiry. He says, "Critical inquiry demands independence of mind and feeling; it demands all that our society tends to deny us. Above all critical inquiry is not an academic retreat; for its maintenance presupposes rebuilding a particular kind of community."⁵¹ Here again, the seeds of practice are coming to fruition since it is precisely through practice that man achieves goods of intrinsic value.

MacIntyre would gradually distance himself both from Marx's optimism at the possibility of a large-scale societal change based on the potential of the proletariat as well as from Marx's historical materialism, but one cannot cease to emphasize that MacIntyre does conserve many core ideals of Marxism such as the social understanding of human nature, a social teleology and the concept of revolutionary or social practice. These ideas spur MacIntyre to find a way out of the "moral wilderness" that we are immersed in. Vindication of the idea of human nature not as merely biological, but historical and social, will be at the center of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* project.⁵²

Turning now to the third general root of MacIntyre's thought, what does he take from the rational resources of Christianity that contribute to the concept of practice? Christianity was a primary object of interest for MacIntyre from the beginning, particularly in relation to Marx, as seen above; consequently, much of what he learns from Christianity coincides with what he takes from Marx.

⁵⁰ M.C. MURPHY, *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, 3.

⁵¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, *Against Utilitarianism*, in T.H. HOLLINS (ed.), *Aims in Education: The Philosophic Approach*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1964, 21.

⁵² Cf. M.C. MURPHY, *Alasdair MacIntyre*, 7.

Early on, MacIntyre makes both investigations into the rationality of Christian belief and a sociological analysis of Christian concepts, its moral norms and vision. A notable example of this is his lecture series *Secularization and Moral Change* where he describes the advent of utilitarianism and rise of unbelief through a process of urbanization which uproots the social order of Christianity.⁵³ As D’Andrea points out, “The central thesis of these lectures is that secularization in Great Britain, the loss of belief in God by individuals and institutions, has not caused, but rather been caused by, social-cum-moral change.”⁵⁴

This brings to attention the first aspect that MacIntyre will conserve from his sociological analysis of Christianity; namely, he maintains that the social framework is intimately connected to the understanding of moral concepts. The fracturing of modern society has, consequently, had a drastic effect on the ability to conceive of society as an organic whole as well as to debate about social and moral ends; the result is a deeper incapacity to grasp the fundamental questions concerning the principal purpose and justification of society. MacIntyre at this stage is pessimistic about the ability for Christianity to find a relevant social embodiment in a secularized age which has passed from a culture of belief to a culture of unbelief. He is rather concerned with analyzing how that transformation has occurred.⁵⁵

MacIntyre gradually grows less critical of Christianity as he begins to adopt an Aristotelian standpoint. This leads to the second positive aspect that he gleans from Christianity which coincides to some degree with what he learned from Marx – that of a teleological, non-consequentialist framework, a framework which would become the backbone of his later proposal. The concept of *telos*, central to Aristotle and to traditional Christian thought, becomes the basis of judging the moral quality of an action; some human acts, for example, are intrinsically bad insofar as they

⁵³ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *Secularization and Moral Change*, Oxford University Press, London 1967, ix.

⁵⁴ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 149-152.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

turn man away from his *telos*.⁵⁶ This integration of a teleological framework into his thought not only inclines MacIntyre to a more positive appreciation of Christianity, but also leads him to embrace many views proposed by Thomas Aquinas. D’Andrea says, “The only form of Christian belief which MacIntyre will come in his later writings to see as tenable is that of the moderately rationalistic sort as subscribed by Thomas Aquinas – he remains of this mind today.”⁵⁷

The last root regards an adequate explanation of human action; this is often at the base of MacIntyre’s vast interest in Marxism, Christianity, sociology and psychology. What he is after is an alternative to mechanistic determinism and behaviorism which reduce causality to efficient causality and inevitably lead to a dead end in explaining human action; according to these theories the purposes, goals and intentions of the agent, which are internal to the significance of the human action, have been neglected.⁵⁸ Regarding this, MacIntyre states the following which serves as a prelude to his *After Virtue* critique of the prediction of human behavior in psychology and the social sciences by showing the relation between action and goal or purpose:

To explain a particular action is to place it in relation to the circumstances out of which it arose and the goal which the agent sought. Stages in a mechanical operation can be explained in terms of the preceding and following stages of events. But they have no goals and they do not respond to circumstance by means of understanding. They simply follow out predetermined paths.⁵⁹

Lutz refers to two contrary standpoints: the standpoint of human action, which sees man’s actions as freely chosen means to reach ends desired by the agents, is opposed to the standpoint of human behavior, which seeks to understand the causes that determine responses. The standpoint of human action is that of Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe and MacIntyre. Action can only be understood in terms of the

⁵⁶ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, “Theology, Ethics, and the Ethics of Medicine and Health Care: Comments on Papers by Novak, Mouw, Roach, Cahill, and Hartt”, *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4 (1979), 437.

⁵⁷ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 163.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁹ A.C. MACINTYRE, “Purpose and Intelligent Action”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 34 (1960), 92, 93.

ends which are final causes to human action. Since ethics is the study of human action, ends and purposes have a central role. Human freedom, in this light, is always seen in function of the end, or good, that it should desire; man becomes freer insofar as he develops his capability of correctly determining the proper means to achieve his good in concrete circumstances. The standpoint of human behavior conflicts with this position in two ways. First, causes that trigger behavior are the primary focus, without reference to the goods that the agent seeks by means of his choice. Second, the rejection of human freedom is presupposed since determinism is a natural precondition of social sciences.⁶⁰

The central problem is that if human action can be reduced to material, efficient causes, such as psychological and social factors, human free-agency is negated: morality becomes an illusion. In MacIntyre's view, human purposes are constitutive of human action; an explanation of distinctly human, that is, rational action, is provided with an adequate explanation in terms of the agent's purpose and desire fulfillment. MacIntyre seeks to show the differences between mechanical, animal and human behavior; man's capacity for language presupposes his ability to choose higher-order purposes.⁶¹ D'Andrea summarizes this point, "Adequate sociological explanation cannot dispense with an assessment of at least the *internal* rationality of an action, that is, the action's conformity or non-conformity to the rules internal to its social context."⁶² This aspect of conformity of an action to rules internal to social context is a clear anticipation of the concept of practice.

MacIntyre further explores how social and historical contexts are essential to understanding human action. This is clear from the three tasks he assigns to the social scientist: to identify the concepts, beliefs and utterances which are characteristic of a particular social order; to determine which actions are rational or irrational in that society based on how they conform or not from accepted social

⁶⁰ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 13–15.

⁶¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, "Breaking the Chains of Reason", in P. BLACKLEDGE - N. DAVIDSON, *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974*, Brill, Boston 2008, 147.

⁶² T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 179.

norms; to philosophically examine the rationality of the beliefs held by the members of a society.⁶³ Thus, human actions presuppose concepts and beliefs particular to the society in which they occur and apart from which they cannot be fully understood. MacIntyre is, however, against many attempts of the social sciences to form law-like generalizations by which human action may be predicted; he is, in other words, against a positivistic sociology.

Gathering the fruits from MacIntyre's reflections on explanation of human action, which come to full maturity in his *After Virtue* project, one can note three essential points. First, MacIntyre is vouching for the standpoint of human action versus the standpoint of human behavior, and thus seeks to reinstate consideration of ends and purposes as the linchpin of ethical theory. Lutz says, "The study of human action, not moral epistemology, is at the center of MacIntyre's ethics."⁶⁴ This standpoint allies him with Aristotle and Aquinas where the question is about what should be done, and where there is a marked emphasis on the agent's excellence, against the predominately modern theories where the question concerns how one can know what should be done, with a consequent focus on rules and principles of moral action.

Second, human action has an intimate relation to desire fulfillment. This is an aspect that has been lost in modern ethical theories, where one seeks the moral rules and laws that should be followed against desires which often tend to the contrary. One clear example of this is the contrast between egoism and altruism in modernity. As Lutz says, "In modern moral philosophy, all goods are private, and one person's pursuit of her or his private goods might prevent others from seeking theirs. [...] Moral sentiment becomes a struggle between egoism and altruism."⁶⁵ In MacIntyre's view, desires have an important role, and through the virtues, these are educated to seek the true good, and thus man freely and creatively desires his own good and the good of the community. Again, quoting Lutz, "Where the tradition

⁶³ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 191.

⁶⁴ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 92.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

had defined virtues of transformed desire that enable people to seek the common good, modernity sees the virtues as either good natural desires or as dispositions to serve the public good against one's own desires."⁶⁶

Finally, human action is inherently teleological. The fundamental rejection of this Aristotelian framework has led to ambiguity and fragmentation in modern moral theories. Rules governing human action are no longer understood and remain as mere survivals; obedience to these rules is a mere act of the will, and herein lies the realm of morality. Hence, there is a dichotomy between human action and moral action. The rejection of teleology and an emphasis on rules establishes "an approach to morality and moral action in which both morality and moral action become unintelligible, for moral action, thus conceived, cannot be accounted for as human action."⁶⁷ MacIntyre will propose a social teleology as the framework of his theory in order to take into account the socio-historical context in which human action occurs. This is an important point of difference with Aristotelian teleology, a point that will be dealt with in greater detail below.

D. Towards a formulation of practice

Thus far, the conceptual analysis of practice has proceeded along two lines – that of a general analysis which focused on what problem practice seeks to resolve, and that of a historical analysis which examined the sources of the development of practice. Regarding the general analysis two conclusions can be drawn. First, practice will be a key element of the solution that MacIntyre is seeking to the contemporary moral crisis. Second, practice goes to the root of the problem by offering a criterion of moral judgment which is integrated into a social and historical context, making moral concepts constitutive of the forms of social life.

From the historical analysis three points of interest stand out. First, MacIntyre shares Marx's vision to link theory to praxis; thus, he understands philosophy as a

⁶⁶ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

source of positive social transformation. This outlook views man's life as a whole; his actions and decisions find their intelligibility within the established practices of a society as contrasted to modern individualism and the alienation of capitalist society. In this regard, MacIntyre sees himself as choosing the road of revolutionary, social practice which was proposed, but not taken, by Marx.

A second and related point is that the concept of practice fits neatly into a teleological framework that finds its sources in Marx, Aristotle and Christianity. Actions are given intelligibility by the purpose or *telos* that they seek to fulfill; likewise, man's life as a whole has meaning insofar as it is directed toward the *telos* of man as such. MacIntyre takes on a progressively positive attitude toward Christianity in this light, leading him to later adopt some central positions of Aquinas.

Third, practice allows MacIntyre to integrate moral concepts into the historical and sociological contexts of which they are constitutive. The fatal error of many Enlightenment philosophers has been to remove moral concepts from the context in which these originally had meaning. MacIntyre seeks to understand their original context, retain what aspects may be conserved, and apply them to our particular historical and social context in order to offer a solution to the contemporary moral crisis; practice allows just such an integration.

With these elements in mind, one can now turn to the solution that MacIntyre gives with his original account of virtue in *After Virtue*. Here he gives an integral definition of the concept of practice that has just been analyzed – practice being central to his theory of virtue, and, as a result, central to his comprehensive solution to the contemporary moral conundrum.

II. VIRTUE IN PRACTICE

A. Context of chapter fourteen within After Virtue

Lutz divides the overall argument of *After Virtue* into two main parts: a critical argument against the ethics of modern liberal individualism, and a constructive part which seeks to formulate an innovative framework along Aristotelian lines.⁶⁸ Chapter fourteen of *After Virtue*, titled *Nature of the Virtues*, offers the heart of MacIntyre's constructive proposal.

In order to put this chapter into its proper context, a brief summary of the preceding chapters is necessary. The first chapters, concerning the critical argument, offer a synthesis of the very themes that MacIntyre had been debating and developing throughout the early years of his career. The main question is the following: how has the culture “in which discussions of human action were at the same time both moral and practical” transformed into a culture “in which discussions of morality—both academic and popular—tend to be incoherent, and strangely disconnected from discussions of practical wisdom”?⁶⁹ MacIntyre begins by offering a comprehensive diagnosis of the contemporary moral crisis where moral disagreements have three main characteristics: the differences of moral positions cannot be resolved by argument since they are founded upon radically incommensurable presuppositions; all who hold these positions appeal to objective, impersonal standards; arguments are typically drawn from historical positions but without taking into account their historical context. Various questions arise as a result, especially on how moral language is being used. A primarily pragmatic use of moral language is what MacIntyre characterizes as emotivism.⁷⁰

Hence, emotivism, which began as a theory about the meaning of moral judgments, is not the focus of attention, but rather the use of moral judgements to

⁶⁸ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 1, 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 56.

express one's opinion and preference is what MacIntyre is against, especially when one seeks win the support of others through manipulation and enticement, rather than rational argument. This is the primary trait of a culture of emotivism of use. There is, thus, an urgent need to discover a non-arbitrary foundation for practical moral evaluation.⁷¹ When values are in effect created by human choice, and all faiths and evaluations are given equal status, a tendency to subvert the opinions of others through manipulation becomes prevalent. MacIntyre describes four embodiments of this manipulative nature of emotivist culture in the social characters of the rich aesthete, the manager, the therapist, and the conservative moralist.⁷² Lutz gives a picture of emotivist society when he says, "It is a collection of autonomous individuals who struggle to balance individualism and collectivism, liberty and oppression, chaos and control. They seek a rational basis for this balance, but they agree that moral choices are essentially or effectively arbitrary."⁷³

Once again the question surfaces. How has a morality based on virtue and human teleology evolved into a morality of emotivism of use? MacIntyre seeks to answer this question by backtracking from the present situation of morality to its immediate sources, namely, the theories of G.E. Moore, C.L. Stevenson and R.M. Hare. From this point, he delves even deeper and finds the ultimate root in the Enlightenment tradition, a progression of which may be seen in the theories of Kierkegaard, Hume, and Kant. MacIntyre has thus sought not only to explain the failure of modern moral theory, but also to state why it had to fail and to show the consequences that this failure has had. Lutz encapsulates MacIntyre's intent when he says, "MacIntyre offers a way of reading that leads out of the wilderness of modern liberal individualism, into a more human land of shared deliberation enabled by virtue."⁷⁴

As mentioned above, this critique of the Enlightenment and its successors is a distinctive feature of many proponents of virtue ethics, as well as of resurgent

⁷¹ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 56, 57.

⁷² Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 26, 30.

⁷³ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 58.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

theories based on natural law; Philippa Foot, for example, calls for a fresh start to moral theory. In her work *Natural Goodness*, she seeks to “set out a view of moral judgement very different from that of most moral philosophers today.”⁷⁵ Her opponents are notably the same as MacIntyre’s. D. Stateman, from the standpoint of virtue ethics, says the following: “This growing attraction of virtue ethics is due not only to the positive features of virtue theory, which is just taking its first steps, but also to growing dissatisfaction with some central features of modern ethical theories.”⁷⁶

After spending two chapters further examining the consequences of the Enlightenment failure, especially concerning contemporary understanding of the fact-value relation and the unsustainable generalizations proposed by the social sciences, MacIntyre then arrives to what may be called the climax of *After Virtue* – the dramatic showdown between Aristotle and Nietzsche. Understanding why this is so will make clear why he ultimately bases his proposal on Aristotle.

An important part of the general thesis of *After Virtue* has been that fragmented moral concepts are mere survivals which no longer find their place within the teleological context in which they originated. As MacIntyre says, “The insoluble problems which they have generated for modern moral theorists will remain insoluble until this is well understood.”⁷⁷

Here MacIntyre draws a comparison to the discovery of the Polynesian word *taboo* which sheds light on just how MacIntyre sees the problem he has been developing up until this point. More than a simple prohibition, *taboo* was a particular reason for the prohibition of certain forms of behavior such as that of men and women eating together. English explorers were perplexed to note that such prohibitions were in stark contrast to the lax sexual habits of the Polynesians. On being questioned about the reasons behind the *taboo*, the Polynesians could offer

⁷⁵ P. FOOT, *Natural Goodness*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, 5.

⁷⁶ D. STATEMAN, “Introduction to Virtue Ethics”, in D. STATEMAN (ed.), *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2.

⁷⁷ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 111.

little or no further explanation. This led to the speculative hypothesis that the natives who used this word did not truly understand what it meant, since they themselves could give no further justification of why certain forms of behavior had been prohibited. Yet, how is it possible that the Polynesians arrived to this point? MacIntyre takes up the theory of Franz Steiner and Mary Douglas who suggest that *taboo* rules have a two-stage history, the first being the specific context in which they originated and were clearly understood. A second stage occurs over time when this original context is lost while the *taboo* remains in vigor, seeming now to be an arbitrary prohibition. This may well explain the ease with which Kamehameha II did away with such taboos.

If one compares this situation to what has occurred with the modern moral concepts such as good, right and obligatory, what is to prevent doing away with such concepts altogether? This is precisely how MacIntyre sees the debate between those such as Moore, who call moral concepts non-natural properties, and those such as Stevenson and Ayer, who say that such concepts have primarily an emotive use. The pointlessness of such a debate arises from the fact that such concepts, as the Polynesian *taboo*, have lost their place in a specific historical context. When this context is not taken into account, no further justification is available, and one is left with a series of fragmented, unintelligible concepts.⁷⁸ MacIntyre asks, “And why should we not think of Nietzsche as the Kamehameha II of the European tradition?”⁷⁹ What should prevent Nietzsche from simply throwing out the senseless moral concepts at the heart of the debate?

Nietzsche has vigorously denounced the notions of morality based either on moral sentiments or on the Kantian categorical imperatives, these being at the heart of the Enlightenment, and has instead declared that morality can be only that which the will creates. MacIntyre calls this the greatest insight of Nietzsche – a discovery and pursuit of the heart of the Enlightenment problem.

⁷⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 111–113.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

For it is in his relentlessly serious pursuit of the problem, not in his frivolous solutions that Nietzsche's greatness lies, the greatness that makes him *the* moral philosopher *if* the only alternatives to Nietzsche's moral philosophy turn out to be those formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors.⁸⁰

One notes the emphasis MacIntyre puts on the fact that Nietzsche only wins out and becomes *the* moral philosopher *if* there are no other alternatives than those provided by the Enlightenment. This has been MacIntyre's point all along. If there are no other alternatives, moral concepts have become unintelligible and irrational, and the only morality will be that which one's will creates.

While MacIntyre does indeed give a harsh criticism of Nietzsche's moral proposals, he also takes into account the greatness of his insight. W.R. Schroeder, in his article *Continental Ethics*, delves into the highly debated underpinnings of Nietzsche's insights, thus revealing many positive aspects, some of which are in common with the convictions of virtue and natural law theory. One such common position is a search for an alternative to consequentialism and Kantian deontology.⁸¹ Nietzsche, at the heart of his proposal, seeks to liberate man from moral codes that are repressive and puritanical. In this regard, Schroeder highlights the positive aspect of Nietzsche's alternative when he says the following:

Instead, the approach Nietzsche would substitute works to cultivate the basic instincts of life and humanity, to increase humanity's capacity for self-transformation, and to make possible a general affirmation of life. [...] He tries to educate people to create goals for themselves, to live with buoyancy, grace, and confidence, finding joy in their actual attainments.⁸²

Thus far, MacIntyre and Nietzsche are in accord; they share a fundamental conviction and base their proposals for human flourishing upon it, albeit with very different results. Nietzsche opts for breaking the shackles of Enlightenment morality: MacIntyre intends to rediscover the lost richness of fragmented moral concepts. Rejection and destruction versus renewal and revival. Lutz emphasizes these two alternatives as the only way to move forward from the moral crisis that

⁸⁰ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 114.

⁸¹ Cf. W.R. SCHROEDER, "Continental Ethics", in H. FOLLETTE (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford 2000, 375, 376.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 381.

MacIntyre has explained. “On the one hand, we can accept the modern denial of teleology, accept that we choose our values, and follow the path of Nietzsche. [...] On the other hand, [...] we may renew ethics, both secular and theistic, as a study of the demands of rational human agency.”⁸³

Returning to the comparison of the Polynesian taboo with modern moral concepts, one sees that there is an alternative to radical dismissal and destruction – that of discovering the original context and meaning of these concepts or *taboos* and proposing a solution to the crisis in that light. On this alternative MacIntyre will stake his claim. Hence his proposal of a return to the Aristotelian tradition, from which one can understand the context of traditional moral concepts as well as the birth and crisis of modern morality which has neglected that context.⁸⁴

The choice for this alternative marks a fundamental transition in *After Virtue* from a *pars destruens* to a *pars construens*, that is, from a diagnostic, critical perspective to the proposal of a veritable solution. “Given the choice between Nietzsche and Aristotle, MacIntyre chooses Aristotle and builds on Aristotle’s account of human action to clear a pathway out of the moral wilderness.”⁸⁵ Aristotle’s path is chosen precisely because it offers an alternative to the theories of human action offered by the Enlightenment, and, as said before, Nietzsche fails if a viable alternative is discovered.

MacIntyre concludes his chapter *Nietzsche or Aristotle* with the following words, setting out the path for the rest of *After Virtue*:

It will be necessary, that is, to write a short history of conceptions of the virtues in which Aristotle provides a central point of his focus, but which yield the resources of a whole tradition of acting, thinking and discourse of which Aristotle is only a part, a tradition of which I spoke earlier as ‘the classical tradition’ and whose view of man I called ‘the classical view of man.’⁸⁶

⁸³ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 102, 103.

⁸⁴ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, prologue.

⁸⁵ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 103.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

From this point of departure, MacIntyre proceeds to spend three chapters examining the primary characteristics of the virtues in the classical tradition. He begins with virtues in Homeric society where, as seen above, they have a direct relation to the excellence with which one fulfills his given role in society. Aristotle clearly inherited a great deal from this Homeric understanding, but distinguishes his own theory of the virtues in a number of crucial aspects. Instead of seeing virtue as merely the excellence with which one fulfills a given role, he sees virtue in relation to the unity of the life of man as such, what constitutes the best life for man, and how man ought to act in order to attain that end and his perfection within the Greek polis. This vision of the unity of man's life and his acting to attain his perfection, which is the good of man as such, would continue as the basis of Christian, or what MacIntyre calls here New Testament, moral reflection.

Of course, the New Testament would introduce a number of fundamental changes to the Aristotelian proposal, such as in what the ultimate end of man consists in, the consequent introduction of virtues that were not appreciated in Greek society (e.g. humility), and the evidencing of the faculty of the will. MacIntyre will later credit Aquinas for offering the best synthesis of the Aristotelian and New Testament moral visions since he integrated the essential aspects of each into a new tradition. In *After Virtue*, however, he remains critical of certain aspects of Aquinas' moral theory, but as he makes evident in the prologue of the third edition, a deeper understanding of Aquinas would greatly impact the future development of his proposal.⁸⁷

B. Virtue in practice

The preceding reflections lead to a possible objection; namely, has MacIntyre gone from one incommensurability to another, from contemporary disagreement concerning moral concepts to classical disagreement concerning virtue? MacIntyre anticipates this very objection saying, "There are just too many different and

⁸⁷ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, x, xi.

incompatible conceptions of a virtue for there to be any real unity to the concept or indeed to the history.”⁸⁸

In general, virtue tradition is a moral approach that puts human agency at the center of attention, thus tying human freedom and good judgement to habits of desiring, choosing and acting. These habits are fundamentally determined by human nature, and possession of them makes a person morally good. Of course, as habits, they need to be developed and perfected; this development is the goal of human life and enables a man to positively contribute to both his own good and the good of his community.⁸⁹ If the main proponents of virtue tradition such as Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas all offer a different hierarchy of virtues, some including virtues incompatible with the virtues that are included by others, does not this mean that the fundamental theory each one proposes is incompatible? Is there a core conception which can unite these theories? MacIntyre proposes to give an adequate response by examining once again the key features of three representatives of virtue tradition – Homer, Aristotle, and Benjamin Franklin – and their lists of virtues.

Having made this examination, MacIntyre arrives to the conclusion that, contrary to first appearance, there is a single, core conception of the diverse accounts of virtues which may indeed make a claim for universal allegiance. As D’Andrea points out, “The purpose of juxtaposing these three theories is to derive some ‘core conception’ of the virtues, one which will separate wheat from chaff, and rescue the wheat from its potential loss at the hands of [...] social and historical contingencies.”⁹⁰ MacIntyre poses the question thus, “What is it in the account which I am about to give which provides in a similar way the necessary background against which the concept of a virtue has to be made intelligible?”⁹¹

⁸⁸ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 181.

⁸⁹ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 153.

⁹⁰ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 268.

⁹¹ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 186.

Lutz says, “The unitary ‘core conception of the virtues’ is not to be found in the concrete practical claims of the contending parties, but in a study of what the contending parties are doing when they define the virtues.”⁹² For this reason, MacIntyre offers three stages of logical development of the concept of virtue, each of these stages having its conceptual background. The development is logical since each stage follows from the other, the earlier stages essentially constituting the later stages.⁹³ Thus, the order in which he presents the stages is fundamental. The first stage consists in pinpointing the locus of virtue in what MacIntyre calls practice; the second stage explains the overall framework in which virtue and practice are situated, what he calls the narrative order of a single human life; the third stage provides the historical and social dimension of virtue which is what he calls a moral tradition.

D’ Andrea puts these three stages in a nutshell, beginning with practice:

[...] the primary defining context and the primary place, MacIntyre will claim empirically, where what we call ‘virtues’ are actually discovered and valued will be in the sphere of what he denominates ‘practices’.

Then he explains the second and third stages:

Next, [...] a quality will only be a candidate for the title of ‘virtue’ if it meets conditions specified by two other dimensions of human life – the unity of the agent’s life, and her or his participation in an ongoing social tradition.⁹⁴

The main focus of this paper so far has been elucidating the first stage of practice, the roots of which were seen in detail above; indeed, since each stage presupposes the previous one, it can be readily seen that the first stage of practice is the most fundamental.

In order to flesh out the key terms of the *After Virtue* definition of practice which was quoted above, MacIntyre gives an example of a practice, that of playing chess. Chess is first understood as a socially established, cooperative human

⁹² C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 118.

⁹³ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 187.

⁹⁴ T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 269.

activity. If one were to teach a child who had little interest in chess how to play, one could motivate him to play by offering him candy as a reward for playing. Here candy would be seen as a good external to the activity of playing chess, and the child would not have fully been initiated into the practice. Yet, after time, it is hoped that the child will begin to discover the joy of chess as such, the competition, the strategy, the intricate moves and rules. These are the goods specific to chess, those which MacIntyre calls internal to the practice. The child now has new reasons for playing chess beyond candy. He plays to excel in the way specific to chess. According to Lutz, “MacIntyre has identified this story as one of the most important passages in the book.”⁹⁶

MacIntyre makes clear the distinction between internal and external goods, later referred to as goods of excellence and goods of efficiency, which becomes a backbone of his conception of practice and, consequently, of virtue. External goods are considered along the lines of an increase of wealth, property, or power; they may be results of carrying out a particular activity well, but are not inherent to that activity. Internal goods can only be achieved by participating in the practice they specifically belong to. They are the results of excellence achieved within a practice. There are two reasons for calling them internal: first, they are specified by the practice to which they pertain; second, they are only identified by those who have already been initiated into the practice, those who have experience. The experience they have makes them both competent as a judge of the excellence with which the practice is carried out and as teacher of those who desire to learn the practice. MacIntyre proceeds to show how this is the case in other examples of practice such as portrait painting.⁹⁷

MacIntyre further evidences two types of internal goods within a practice. First, that of the products, for example, the portraits painted and the skill of the painter, which must be understood historically. This means that the types and modes of excellence must be seen in reference to the developments within that practice,

⁹⁶ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 119.

⁹⁷ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 188, 189.

here of portrait painting. In other words, there is a certain progress or decline, as may be the case, within the practice. In the attempts to sustain the progress of the practice and respond to problems and aporiae, the second type of internal good can be seen, namely, that of living one's life, to a greater or lesser degree, as a member of a practice – in this case as a painter who discovers the good of a certain kind of life by his seeking excellence within the practice of portrait painting.⁹⁸

A problem seems to arise at this point: if one achieves the goods internal to practice by his very participation in that practice, thus accepting the rules and standards of the practice as an authority, how might these standards themselves be subject to rational criticism? How, in other words, can one verify the quality of the standards themselves? MacIntyre clarifies that while one does indeed need to subject himself to the established standards which are partially definitive of the practice, these standards are not immune to criticism. They must, however, be accepted as the best standards realized so far. This is an important step in ruling out subjectivism and emotivism since the standards are the objective measure by which the quality of one's participation in a practice is determined. One must integrate himself fully into a practice, thus becoming an expert, in order to be able to participate in the discussion of the possibility of better formulated standards.⁹⁹

MacIntyre offers a preliminary definition of virtue based on this first stage of practice, thus making clear that it is particularly through the virtues that we attain the goods internal to practice. He says:

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.¹⁰⁰

Lutz comments, "The success of a practice depends on the moral character of its practitioners. This first definition reconnects desire and morality by showing

⁹⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 189, 190.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

how the virtues are related to our pursuits of our goals.”¹⁰¹ How does MacIntyre show that virtues are essentially related to the attainment of good internal to practice? It seems a stretch, for example, to say that virtue is a necessary part of being able to play chess well or to make a good pitch in baseball. Yet, MacIntyre shows that the virtues of justice, honesty and courage are indeed at the heart of a practice by reflecting on the relationships that are necessarily created among those involved in a practice. Honesty, first of all, is at the base of allegiance in any relationship; cheating and lying may be profitable in attaining external goods, but they destroy the fundamental relationships that form an essential part of a practice. Through the virtue of justice, one recognizes what he owes to the others, particularly merit and respect due to others within the practice. This is of prime importance for the tyro who must recognize the deference he owes to those more versed in the practice; the expert, in his turn, owes patience and dedication to the beginner. Finally, courage enables one to risk his own benefit for those he has joined in a common pursuit; care and concern may be professed, but unless they are shown at one’s own expense, they count for little. Virtues, by sustaining the relationships of the members of a practice, sustain the practice itself.¹⁰²

Not only will a practice decline in proportion to the loss of esteem for these virtues, but also an individual, though skillful, who lacks the virtues will deprive himself of the internal goods of the practice. Some, such as S. Scheffler, have objected that this claim is counter-intuitive.¹⁰³ Scheffler points out that it is evident enough that the positive progression of a practice does depend on virtues, as MacIntyre has suggested. However, what is to prevent a depraved and vicious individual who is a genius chess player from achieving the internal goods of the practice of chess?¹⁰⁴ A satisfactory answer to this objection is crucial for MacIntyre’s proposal. How he answers this must be seen in context of the second

¹⁰¹ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 158.

¹⁰² Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 191, 192.

¹⁰³ Cf. T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 270, 271.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. S. SCHEFFLER, “Review of *After Virtue*”, *The Philosophical Review* 93, No. 3 (1983), 446.

stage of the development of virtue regarding the *telos* of human life, an argument that will be developed below.

One recalls that practice is the first stage of developing virtue as the core concept of the classical tradition. MacIntyre has shown that no matter the different moral codes of societies, practices only flourish in societies where the virtues are valued. This is not to deny that some societies may excel in achieving external goods and technical skills; goods of excellence, however, are intimately tied to appreciation of the virtues. The classical tradition has notably held virtue in high esteem, yet how does one account for the varied and contradictory lists of particular virtues? In answer to this question, MacIntyre introduces the historical dimension. MacIntyre says, “Practices never have a goal or goals fixed for all time – painting has no such goal nor has physics – but the goals themselves are transmuted by the history of the activity.”¹⁰⁵

MacIntyre’s point here is that to enter into a practice is also to enter into a historical tradition, that is, into a relationship not only with the present partakers of the practice, but also with all who have participated in the practice throughout history. According to MacIntyre this relationship with the past implies the same virtues that are required for the sustaining of the relationships presently within the practice.¹⁰⁶ If MacIntyre is right, the difficulty of varied lists of virtue within different epochs of the classical tradition begins to vanish. The core concept of virtue, partially defined and presupposed by practice, is present in every epoch, and the core virtues of justice, honesty, and courage have held an essential place in conserving this tradition. Deep conceptual unity is present: divergence on contingent matters is due to the historical progress of the tradition.

Further evidence for the necessity of the virtues in sustaining practices is seen when one contrasts practices with institutions. Basketball, for example, is a practice, while the National Basketball Association is an institution. There is often an

¹⁰⁵ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 193, 194.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 194.

intimate relation between a practice and the institution that carries it forward and sustains it; indeed, on this basis one could argue for the intimate relation between internal and external goods. Yet, MacIntyre warns that institutions over time may have a corruptive influence on a practice when, due to competitiveness, the internal goods are overlooked in favor of external goods. Hence, the need for justice, honesty and courage to resist this corruptive power.¹⁰⁷

In general, Lutz deduces four characteristics of practice. First, people pursue a practice because it responds to something they desire, something they want to attain. Second, the practice has unique internal goods which can be attained only by participation in this practice. By pursuing these goods, one achieves excellence in the practice. Third, each practice has standards of excellence that develop together with the practice. Finally, the success of the practice is intimately related to and dependent upon the virtues or moral character of those who participate in it.¹⁰⁸

MacIntyre now makes the important claim that the very forming and sustaining of human communities, as well as the seeking of the moral life, have the essential characteristics of practice.¹⁰⁹ As Lutz says, “MacIntyre wants to argue that the good life for man, the moral life, is also a practice.”¹¹⁰

This is a bold amplification of understanding practice simply as an activity, such as chess and portrait painting, to the constitutive acts of man and society; institutions are no longer only chess clubs and associations of the arts, but also governments and political institutions. If this claim is accepted, the virtues must be essential to the progress and sustainment of man and society itself. MacIntyre evidences two ways that this constitutive practice stands in close relation to the exercise of virtues. He says, “The exercise of virtues is itself apt to require a highly

¹⁰⁷ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 193, 194.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. C. S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 157.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 194.

¹¹⁰ C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD 2004, 42.

determinate attitude to social and political issues; and it is always within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues.”¹¹¹

On the one hand, virtue exercise forms society and its politics; on the other hand, the community is the place where virtues are learned. MacIntyre illustrates this virtue-society relation by evidencing the diverse outlook between the modern, individualist society and the ancient and medieval societies, emphasizing the divergence of how each society sees the relationship between moral character and the political community. The former puts the individual at the center, each one pursuing his own interests and goods, while political institutions serve to maintain order and peace so that this may be possible. The government has no place enforcing any type of morality. Ancient and medieval societies, on the other hand, emphasized the community in which the individual found a place. Here virtue was at the center, and moral education was a prime duty of the parents. Naturally, the virtues promoted by the individualist society will be at odds with those promoted by a community-centered society. MacIntyre says the following:

If my account of the complex relationship of virtues to practices and to institutions is correct, it follows that we shall be unable to write a true history of practices and institutions unless that history is also one of the virtues and vices. For the ability of a practice to retain its integrity will depend on the way in which the virtues can be and are exercised in sustaining the institutional forms which are the social bearers of the practice. The integrity of a practice causally requires the exercise of the virtues by at least some of the individuals who embody it in their activities; and conversely the corruption of institutions is always in part at least an effect of the vices.¹¹²

MacIntyre has thus amplified his vision of practice to the point where the moral life and the formation of society may be understood as the most fundamental of all practices. A problem, however, emerges. How can the moral life constitute a practice when there is so much disagreement as to what the moral life consists in? As Lutz remarks, “History and contemporary experience present a host of practices, and each of them has its own account of what the moral life should be.”¹¹³ This, as

¹¹¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 194, 195.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹³ C. S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 42.

Lutz points out, leads to a strong argument in favor of relativism since, if practices set standards, and culture is fundamental to the practice of morality, then morality would be as relative as culture is.¹¹⁴ R. Wachbroit seconds the motion by noting a problem with the justification of a practice. He says, “Plainly not every practice is justifiable, and we might begin to wonder whether this crucial appeal to practices leads to moral relativism.”¹¹⁵ The charge of relativism has continually plagued MacIntyre’s proposal, and thus merits specific attention which will be given below in the section on the developments of the *After Virtue* project.

Summarizing the practice-virtue relationship, the following conclusions may be drawn. First, practice is the locus of the virtues, that is, virtues are presupposed in practice and partially defined by practices which themselves are the source of standards. Second, the fundamental virtues of justice, honesty and courage are essential to the preservation and progression of practice; if society formation and the moral life are understood as practices, the implications are evident. Third, practices have an intimate relationship with the institutions which carry them forward, and the way in which the virtues are exercised and promoted will determine whether the practice will be sustained or corrupted by the institution.

The definition of virtue in practice is still incomplete. MacIntyre does, in fact, call this only the first of three stages. Virtue is not restricted to practice, but only finds its primary location in practice. Practice, however, finds its place in the much wider context of a teleological framework.¹¹⁶ Lutz explains, “A more complete definition of the virtues needs to show how they are related to our personal goals.”¹¹⁷ This leads directly to the next stages of the core concept of virtue.

¹¹⁴ Cf. C. S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 42.

¹¹⁵ R. WACHBROIT, “A Genealogy of Virtues”, *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 92, no. 3 (1983), 572.

¹¹⁶ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 201.

¹¹⁷ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 158.

C. Virtues, the unity of human life, and the concept of tradition

MacIntyre's point has been that moral concepts, which originated and developed in a teleological framework, have been alienated and fragmented in contemporary moral philosophy to the point that understanding man's life as a united whole is foreign to many post-modern theories. Hence the importance of reintegrating moral concepts into this unified framework, showing both the limitations of contemporary theories and how a teleological framework overcomes these limitations.

So far, MacIntyre has extensively argued for the situation of virtues within practice. To stop here would result in a hopeless complication – man's life being divided between various conflicting practices without any criteria of how to direct his life and action. Summarizing this position, MacIntyre says the following:

[...] unless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will *both* be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life *and* that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately.¹¹⁸

MacIntyre brings attention to two obstacles that are present in contemporary moral understanding which a teleological framework seeks to overcome – one social and one philosophical. The social obstacle results from the division and partitioning of man's life into unconnected segments.¹¹⁹ This theme is elucidated in much of MacIntyre's later writing especially in relation to the problems faced by the contemporary vision of the university. Each subject is studied as if it were totally unconnected from the others, giving the student a highly specialized technical education geared toward success in the workplace. The medieval university had a diametrically opposed vision, where the liberal arts were crowned and completed

¹¹⁸ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 203.

¹¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 204.

by studies in philosophy and ultimately in theology. Even while many students did not complete the whole curriculum, the unitary vision was never lost.¹²⁰

The philosophical problem reveals itself both in the understanding of human action and in the post-modern conception of the self – complex human actions are analyzed as if atomically, without reference to their larger purpose, and the roles an individual has are sharply distinct from the individual himself.¹²¹ What is called for at this point is both a satisfactory explanation of human action and a distinct vision of self which is capable of giving meaning to virtue – virtue is here understood as a disposition to achieve the good in the diverse circumstances of man's life. "The unity of a virtue in someone's life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole."¹²²

These problems are at the heart of the teleological solution that MacIntyre proceeds to offer, a solution that gives overall unity to man's life and makes his action intelligible. Four crucial concepts underpin this proposal: historical narrative, intelligibility, accountability and personal identity. Each concept mutually presupposes the other, and all seek to give a cogent understanding of ordinary human behavior.

The first concept is narrative which has a close relation to practice. Lutz affirms, "Narratives constitute the self-understandings of, and set the constitutional limits for, the practices they define. So practices emerge from history as the enactments of narrative accounts that interpret the significance of past events."¹²³

MacIntyre draws the concept of narrative from his analysis of human action; any human action presupposes at least two important elements. The first is the setting in which the individual agent and his activity is placed, setting being

¹²⁰ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD 2011.

¹²¹ IDEM, *After Virtue...*, 204, 205.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 205.

¹²³ C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 43, 44.

understood inclusively as a social institution or practice. The second element consists in the intentions of the agent; a proper characterization of an action must take into consideration the primary and secondary, long and short-term intentions of the agent. Thus, each human action involves a socio-historical context and a reference to a causal order of agent intentions. Taken comprehensively, this is what MacIntyre calls a narrative history which is an essential genre for characterizing human actions.¹²⁴ D'Andrea points out the following in this regard:

Adequately explaining human action requires that we discover what *story* the agent understands himself to be living out and extending in undertaking a given action – what episode in that story, that is, his action is attempting to enact.¹²⁵

MacIntyre evidences two components of a narrative. First, all narratives have a beginning, a middle and an end. This is as much the case of the narratives of individuals who are the agents of the actions as it is of the actions themselves. Death is clearly the end which confines the narrative history of every man. Birth is the beginning, but it is clear that each man enters the grand scene *in media res*, that is, within a given historical and social context. The middle of the story is the present moment in which man is acting out the narrative, a moment which is the convergence of past experiences and future expectations. The same is true for actions and events which may be seen as both beginnings and ends; MacIntyre gives the example of the battle of Waterloo which constituted an ending of the Napoleonic Era, but also the beginning of a new world order.¹²⁶

Second, narratives are typically embedded within other narratives. Each man is the principal actor of his own play, yet finds that he has greater or lesser roles in the dramas of others. MacIntyre gives the example of the life of Mary Stuart which was embedded in the drama of Elizabeth I, both part of the greater drama of Tudor England.¹²⁷ In his book *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue*, MacIntyre puts these considerations into practice showing that one can only understand Stein's

¹²⁴ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 206–208.

¹²⁵ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 276.

¹²⁶ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 212.

¹²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 212, 213.

religious conversion within the context, or narrative, of her whole life, particularly of her philosophical formation.¹²⁸

The theme of narrative will be further elucidated in the third stage of moral tradition since a narrative is not only that of an individual, but also of a whole society. MacIntyre, in fact, dedicates his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* precisely to this topic regarding how to determine which tradition achieves rational superiority by means of dialectic engagement.

The second concept underpinning MacIntyre's proposal is intelligibility, which provides the conceptual link between the notions of action and narrative. As Lutz says, "A particular culture's practice of the moral life with its peculiar understanding of the virtues only becomes intelligible in the light of the narrative account of the good life that it enacts."¹²⁹

An intelligible action has two clear dimensions: first, the action flows from the intentions, ends and motives of the agent, and on these terms is endowed with intelligibility; second, the agent, as author, is accountable for the action in that he should be able to offer an intelligible account of why he is acting in a specific way. Lutz comments, "Human action is so tied to intentions, beliefs and settings that the things we do and say are to be understood as the acting out of our understanding of the world. [...] Our actions enact our narratives."¹³⁰ To illustrate this, MacIntyre makes an analysis of the phenomenon of conversation in which particular words and phrases find their intelligibility; the same applies to human action in general, where a particular action is placed in the narrative history of the both the agent and the setting in which he is acting.¹³¹ Thus, there is an intimate link between intelligible action and narrative history. MacIntyre writes:

¹²⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue*, Continuum, London 2010.

¹²⁹ C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 44.

¹³⁰ IDEM, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 124.

¹³¹ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 209–212.

Once we have understood its importance [of intelligibility], the claim that the concept of an action is secondary to that of an intelligible action will perhaps appear less bizarre and so too will the claim that the notion of ‘an’ action, while of the highest practical importance, is always a potentially misleading abstraction. An action is a moment in a possible or actual history or in a number of such histories. The notion of a history is as fundamental a notion as the notion of an action. Each requires the other.¹³²

The third concept is accountability which is derived from the roles an individual has and from his relation to others. Man finds himself immersed in a story, that is, in a particular society in a given historical moment with an established role. By learning these roles, one also discovers how he should interact with the other characters that surround him; one discovers himself as accountable for his own actions and capable of calling others to account for theirs. Within a narrative, one notices a dynamic relation between unpredictability of human freedom and one’s role, between how one might act and how he should act. The role provides the constraints and limitations within which one may act intelligibly, while freedom allows man to creatively choose which way he will proceed within those constraints, always risking a fall into unintelligibility by defying his role.¹³³

The fourth fundamental concept is personal identity which gives singular unity to the whole narrative. While one may act at different times and at different places, he never ceases to be the same person. “Personal identity,” MacIntyre says, “is just that identity presupposed by the unity of character which the unity of narrative requires. Without such unity there would not be subjects of whom stories could be told.”¹³⁴

The conclusion of the preceding analysis is that the unity of an individual life consists in the unity of the narrative embodied by that individual. Two fundamental questions concerning one’s individual good and the good of man in general are given adequate response; namely, one should choose that which enables him, individually or collectively, to live out the unity of his life and bring it to

¹³² A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 214.

¹³³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 215, 218.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

completion. Hence, the attempt to answer these two questions in word and deed gives moral life its unity. This is what MacIntyre calls the narrative quest, a quest which may be undertaken or abandoned, a quest which may succeed or fail.¹³⁵

There are two key aspects of the medieval understanding of a quest that MacIntyre draws from and applies to the moral life. First, a quest is always for something – it has a determinate *telos*. In the moral life this is some conception of man's good. What is the good for which man strives? MacIntyre's answer reveals three characteristics of the good; namely, it orders all other goods, it gives purpose and content to virtue, and it reveals virtues such as integrity and constancy essential to man's ability to carry on his quest. His answer is as follows:

It is in looking for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to order other goods for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to extend our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues for a conception of *the* good which will enable us to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life, that we initially define the kind of life which is a quest for the good.¹³⁶

The second characteristic of the quest is that one rarely has a complete understanding of what he is looking for, what the adventure will entail, and what is needed to succeed. Only during the course of the adventure, with all that it entails, is the full meaning able to be grasped. MacIntyre says, "A quest is always an education as to the character of what is sought and in self-knowledge."¹³⁷

The second stage of the defining virtue is now clear. Not only are virtues situated in practices, sustaining them and enabling man to achieve their internal goods, but virtues also sustain man on his quest for the good. All throughout this quest man achieves an ever-growing knowledge of himself and of the good proper to him.¹³⁸ MacIntyre summarizes:

¹³⁵ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*..., 218, 219.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

We have then arrived at a provisional conclusion about the good life for man: the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.¹³⁹

An important gap has now been filled. After understanding virtues as situated in practices, man's life seemed to be lost in a sea of unconnected practices without any criteria of how to determine which one to choose and focus on. However, when practices themselves are situated within the context of the unity of man's life, the *telos* of that life sheds light on the proper ordering of the goods and practices. D'Andrea emphasizes this point when he says, "The larger good of these agents' lives requires that these qualities or virtues have a scope and a horizon for action beyond that of some individual practice."¹⁴⁰

To return to Scheffler's objection raised above, how does MacIntyre's teleological understanding offered by narrative history solve the problem of the possibility of vicious person being able to attain the internal goods of practice? The main problem does seem to have been solved, since the internal goods of a particular practice must necessarily be ordered by, and in function of, the most fundamental practice of the individual, that is, his living of the moral life. A degraded, but expert chess player may apparently achieve the internal goods of chess, but if these goods are not integrated into the whole unity of his life, his seeking of the best life, then these goods are not truly achieved at their full potential. Scheffler concedes as much, but objects that new difficulties arise when MacIntyre formulates the good life for man as "the life spent in seeking the good life for man."¹⁴¹ Scheffler says the following, showing that MacIntyre's theory still stands in need of further development:

¹³⁹ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 219.

¹⁴⁰ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 274.

¹⁴¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 219.

This formulation raises more questions than it answers. What is to count as seeking? Is there anything for a person who is seeking the good life to find apart from the activity of seeking itself? If so, then why doesn't the good life consist in attaining that thing, rather than in seeking it? If not, then why exactly is seeking such a thing so good? And so on.¹⁴²

This leads to the third and final stage in the account of virtues – that of moral tradition. From the reflections on the narrative unity of man's life, it is implied that the individual finds himself in a social and historical context which implies a conception of what the good life for man is, as well as a common set of valued virtues. This reveals that each man is necessarily endowed with a social identity inherited from those who preceded him, an identity that includes obligations and expectations. MacIntyre says, "These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity."¹⁴³ Lutz puts this step into the context of the whole *After Virtue* project when he says, "MacIntyre's appeal to tradition is not a conservative call to return to historic moral norms. It is a final and thorough rejection of individualism."¹⁴⁴

Three layers of embeddedness of a human action are now evident from the three stages that have been considered: a human action is typically embedded in a particular practice, which itself is embedded in the narrative of an individual or society, which is in turn embedded in a larger moral tradition. The exercise of the virtues are necessary at all levels for the positive progress and sustenance of practices, narratives and moral traditions. Thus, all three stages now fit neatly together, each depending on the other. "A man may appear to be virtuous according to the insufficient first- and second-level definitions," Lutz comments, "but he could hardly be considered as an excellent human being."¹⁴⁵ MacIntyre says the following, showing the necessity of the virtues at all three stages:

¹⁴² S. SCHEFFLER, "Review of *After Virtue*"..., 446.

¹⁴³ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*..., 220.

¹⁴⁴ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 125.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

The virtues find their point and purpose not only in the sustaining of those relationships necessary if the variety of goods internal to practices are to be achieved and not only in sustaining the form of an individual life in which that individual may seek out his or her good as the good of his or her whole life, but also in sustaining those traditions which provide both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context.¹⁴⁶

MacIntyre highlights the importance of the virtues of justice, honesty, and courage in view of the relationships between those of the same tradition in much the same way that he showed that the exercise of virtues is essential to the sustenance of relationships of those involved in a practice. Yet, MacIntyre adds an interesting virtue to this list – the virtue of having an adequate sense of tradition which “manifests itself in a grasp of those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present.”¹⁴⁷ This virtue has a remarkable similarity to the virtue of prudence understood as the application of right reason to action, and in this sense would be a keystone virtue, though little developed, for MacIntyre. By means of this virtue one knows “how to select among the relevant stack of maxims and how to apply them in particular situations.”¹⁴⁸ The possession or lack of this virtue thus determines one’s ability to be able to contribute effectively by means of concrete choices to one’s own good and the good of the whole society and its moral tradition. This marks a significant advancement in MacIntyre’s theory which now has application to the practical, specific decisions of everyday life. Lutz comments, “To agree with MacIntyre is to accept that morality is social and concrete, and constituted largely by human relationships.”¹⁴⁹

Numerous questions are left unanswered in *After Virtue* regarding this concept of tradition. For example, granted that one is endowed with a social identity based on the tradition of which he is a part, how might he be able to recognize inconsistencies of his tradition and either resolve these or integrate himself into another tradition? What is the criteria for deciding which tradition has rational superiority? These and similar questions are the primary topic of *Whose Justice?*

¹⁴⁶ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 223.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 126.

Which Rationality?. The last work of MacIntyre's trilogy, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*,¹⁵⁰ proposes a vindication of the Thomistic tradition as a rationally superior tradition on various counts, this tradition being the best-so-far formulation of the Christian tradition understood as a whole.

Still, already in *After Virtue* this preliminary understanding of tradition offers a comprehensive understanding of virtue. His definition of virtue has proceeded through three stages: first, virtues have their primary locus in, and are partially defined by, practice; second, practices themselves are embedded in the narrative unity of an individual life, and thus virtues, to qualify as such, must enable a man to seek the best life; third, practices and individuals are embedded in a moral and social tradition, and the exercise of virtues enable one to seek the good and progress of this whole. Understanding the exercise of virtues, in this sense, provides the whole classical tradition with conceptual unity and thus becomes the basis for a tradition of the virtues. With this account, MacIntyre believes to have found the original context of fundamental moral concepts; by reintegrating them into this context, he is able to argue for a return to the framework offered by the tradition of the virtues which he believes offers a promising solution to the crisis of contemporary morality.

¹⁵⁰ A.C. MACINTYRE, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2014.

III. OBJECTIONS TO VIRTUE IN PRACTICE

At this point it is necessary to turn to a few prominent objections to MacIntyre's theory of virtue as proposed in *After Virtue*. This will lead to a final reflection on directions that the *After Virtue* project has taken, and in this light, a proposal for further developments. The first series of objections arises from MacIntyre's claim to return to an Aristotelian framework. To what degree does MacIntyre follow Aristotle and are there insuperable discrepancies? The second series of objections refers to the MacIntyre's understanding of practice. What exactly constitutes a practice and how does one justify a practice? Does the placing of virtue in practice, a socially and historically determined concept, necessarily lead to relativism?

A. MacIntyre and Aristotle

MacIntyre has effectively argued for a return to the core of Aristotelian theory which gives a central place to virtue, but while the Aristotelian elements of MacIntyre's proposal are clear, there seems to be a divergence between MacIntyre's and Aristotle's teleology and, consequently, of their precise understanding of virtue. Are these diversities ultimately reconcilable, or has there been a fundamental shift in the so-called tradition of virtues?

D'Andrea points out that whereas Aristotle gives a virtue a personal locus, where the primary function of a virtue is in function of personal development, MacIntyre focuses on the social aspect of virtues, giving them their primary locus in practice which they sustain.¹⁵¹ Thus, MacIntyre argues for a foundation on social teleology instead of Aristotle's biological teleology which, in *After Virtue*, he considers outdated. While MacIntyre would change his opinion on this matter in his later works, especially in *Dependent Rational Animals*, it is worth examining the reasons why his *After Virtue* position is unsuitable. The principal question is as

¹⁵¹ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 271.

follows: though it is evident that many aspects of Aristotle's biology have been debunked by advances in contemporary science, does this allow for a complete rejection of the heart of Aristotle's theory, especially the metaphysical conclusions? T.H. Irwin deals with this theme in his work *The Development of Ethics* when he considers the different versions of naturalism. MacIntyre's *After Virtue* argument, according to Irwin, shows the essential role of Aristotle's metaphysical biology by a *reductio ad absurdum*, that is, by showing the inconsistency of Aristotle's theory without his biology. It is necessary for Aristotle to appeal to metaphysical biology as a way to rely on something outside of divergent conceptions of eudemonia that have been present in history. In other words, one needs a way to appeal to human nature as a reference point outside of conflicting ideals and values promoted by different cultures and societies. MacIntyre strongly objects that a general conception of eudemonia cannot be formed, one that is not a conception relative to a specific cultural ideal, unless it relies on metaphysical biology, but since this biology has been discredited, an appeal to eudemonia based upon it cannot be a firm base for ethical theory.¹⁵²

Irwin admits that much of Aristotle's biology has been discredited, but asks, "How much of his natural teleology belongs among these discredited beliefs?"¹⁵³ The answer to this question goes to the heart of the matter, since Aristotle's fundamental insights are not open to criticism simply on the basis of his outdated biology. Aristotle's claims are about essence, nature and function, and these may be accepted as reasonable metaphysical claims apart from the ever developing understanding provided by science. This understanding of Aristotle is based on an important distinction between metaphysical biology, which provides static explanations based on human nature and essence, and scientific biology which seeks to provide explanations based on the most recent scientific theories and best developed scientific technology. Aristotle engaged in both; his claims which rely on pre-scientific theories are to be discredited – claims such as those regarding the

¹⁵² Cf. T.H. IRWIN, *The Development of Ethics*, vol.3: *From Kant to Rawls*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, 875-877.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 877.

structure of the heavens and natural processes of living beings. Yet, if one takes Aristotle's attempt in the former sense, there is no adequate reason to throw out his metaphysical biology. Irwin concludes, "Aristotle's claims are reasonable in their own right, apart from any questionable doctrines about the nature of the universe or natural processes."¹⁵⁴

At the heart of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* project is an attempt to offer "a way to reconnect ethics and desire without atavism, without turning back the clock to the metaphysics of Aristotle."¹⁵⁵ He does this by placing the primary locus of virtues in practices, in the narrative unity of a human life, and in a moral tradition. The question proposed at the beginning of this section now arises in full force. "If the notion of virtue, expounded as MacIntyre expounds it, does not presuppose Aristotle's metaphysics, is it really Aristotle's notion of virtue?"¹⁵⁶

When one considers only the first stage of MacIntyre's analysis of virtue, the difference is admittedly rather pronounced, but with the introduction of the second stage, the narrative unity of the individual life, a path to compatibility seems to open up. Virtues, understood as sustaining social practices are, in fact, fundamentally connected to the unity and coherence of the lives of the individuals. This intimate connection is based upon the society-individual relation which it presupposes. If virtues, according to MacIntyre, sustain practices and are partially defined by them, it also follows that virtues sustain the individuals who participate in those practices. In other words, a practice will deteriorate to the degree that the individuals who participate in it lack the virtues necessary to sustain it. D'Andrea claims that MacIntyre's account may be seen as supplementing, rather than replacing, Aristotle's account, adding important features that Aristotle neglected, such as the role of social collectivity and the fact that ends of certain types of human activity undergo transformation and development over the course of history.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ T.H. IRWIN, *The Development of Ethics...*, 877.

¹⁵⁵ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 159.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 271.

Lutz proposes a deeper examination of the problem by considering the roles of both metaphysics and practice in Aristotle, Aquinas, and MacIntyre. First, for Aristotle, teleology is the core of his natural philosophy, explaining why substances composed of matter and form act for an end specified by their nature. Form, in this sense, is both a principle of specification and of operation. Man, as a rational animal, tends toward knowledge, and thus excellence for man is equated with the moral and intellectual virtues. There is, thus, an intimate relation between teleology and metaphysics for Aristotle, metaphysics providing the foundation of our experience of teleology both in nature and in human action.¹⁵⁸

Aristotle takes another approach to teleology when he explains how one should develop moral virtue. This makes evident that while the capacity to develop virtue is based on man's nature, the knowledge of the virtues is not innate, but is acquired through education and formation. Aristotle himself says, "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature, do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit."¹⁵⁹ Hence the need to learn from the *sophron* how to act and choose the true goods. Lutz summarizes, "Aristotle may explain teleology through metaphysics, but the agent's understanding of the demands of that teleology develops through reflection on human action. Aristotle never pretends to use metaphysics to offer us an adequate guide to morals."¹⁶⁰

Aquinas works from the fundamental presupposition of the Christian understanding of creation, which accounts for many of the considerable changes that he makes to Aristotle's theory. Yet, though Aquinas is different in some crucial aspects, he is in agreement with Aristotle's account that "metaphysics explains the causes of teleology, but metaphysics does not provide a moral epistemology."¹⁶¹ Lutz brings to attention two places in the *Summa Theologiae* where Aquinas addresses these issues. In Ima Ilae, Question 19, he argues for the subjectivity of

¹⁵⁸ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 167.

¹⁵⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1 [1103a23-5], all translations by W.D. ROSS.

¹⁶⁰ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 169.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

human action, where the *bonus intellectus* – the good as understood by the agent in his concrete circumstances – is the object of choice of the will. Thus, an erroneous conscience binds the agent to act according to his understanding of the goodness or malice of an action. Of course, Aquinas also explains that the failure to educate the conscience correctly makes one morally culpable for his misapprehension of the true good and evil of an action. For Aquinas, the measure of human action is ultimately the Eternal Law in the Divine Intellect, since the natural law in us can be distorted. Lutz remarks, “So it seems that our apprehension of the natural law in us depends in large measure on the moral character of the communities that form us, that is, it depends on practice, self-understanding and life goals, traditions and institutions.”¹⁶²

In Question 100, Article 1, Aquinas provides an explanation of how natural law is present in all human beings by nature, and that while human reason may recognize what is right and wrong for the most part, reason may fail in certain cases both as regards to rectitude and by reason of perversion. Lutz concludes, “Thus Thomas, like Aristotle, allows that the *humanly understood* content of virtuous agency remains open to both development and corruption with the life of any given community.”¹⁶³ Of course, the truth of the virtues always has its foundation in the divine exemplars; human understanding of what the virtues entail is thus more or less true based on how it measures up to these exemplars.

MacIntyre takes the core of Aristotle relating to human action and human agency. As seen above, this understanding is in stark contrast with human behavior accounts and other modern moral theories which separate desire from morality. The virtues, according to MacIntyre, have an essential role to play as “qualities of character that support human agency and make us better and more effective practical reasoners and human agents, and they are to be discovered and identified by examining the conditions in which human agents act.”¹⁶⁴ MacIntyre, like

¹⁶² C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 172.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

Aristotle and Aquinas proposes a teleological framework, yet there are crucial differences. Lutz points out these divergences: Aristotle explains teleology on the basis of a metaphysics of hylomorphic substances; Aquinas integrates this vision into a Christian understanding of man as a creature made in the image of God; MacIntyre focuses on teleology in social practices, in the unity of a human life, and in a comprehensive moral tradition. Aristotle and Aquinas sought to offer metaphysical explanations as the foundation of the teleology they experienced in human actions: MacIntyre sees teleology as socially observed and discovered, but he does not attempt to offer a metaphysical explanation of it.¹⁶⁵

In short, one sees that while there are fundamental differences between Aristotle and MacIntyre, these divergences do not preclude possible compatibility. First, as seen above, Aristotle's metaphysical biology needs to be distinguished from his scientific biology. This is a point that MacIntyre would reformulate, as will be seen below. Second, MacIntyre's social teleology was proposed without relying on a metaphysical explanation, but this does not mean that such an explanation is impossible; in fact, it is a development that needs to be made.

B. Objections to MacIntyre's account of practice

Lutz notes a series of objections that arise from MacIntyre's account of practice.¹⁶⁶ S. Hauerwas and P. Wadell claim that there is little clarity on how to determine what qualifies as a practice, hence questioning the relationship of practice and virtue. They say, "It may well be that MacIntyre's account of a practice actually weakens his case because there is nothing he says about a practice that perhaps would not be better treated as intrinsic to virtue itself."¹⁶⁷ S. Feldman claims for a need to further distinguish between internal and external goods, where winning, for example, may be seen as both the internal and external good of an

¹⁶⁵ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 173, 174.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. IDEM, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 95–104.

¹⁶⁷ S. HAUERWAS – P. WADELL, "Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue*", *The Thomist* 46, no. 2 (April 1982), 320.

athletic competition.¹⁶⁸ Another objection arises if virtues are partially defined by their place in practices. If this is the case, how can one account for certain intrinsically evil practices such as torture? How can a disposition which sustains such a practice be considered a virtue?¹⁶⁹

Lutz proposes a three-fold approach in answer to these objections: a clarification on the distinction between internal and external goods, which will help determine what qualifies as a practice and explain the possible overlapping of these goods; an examination of the difficulties that arise due to MacIntyre's rejection of Aquinas' theory of unity of the virtues; and a supplemented account of MacIntyre's theory of the virtues after his acceptance of Aquinas' theory of unity.¹⁷⁰ The first two parts of this answer will be seen in this section, while the third part will be seen in the following section on the developments of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* project.

Above, when considering MacIntyre's definition of practice, the distinction between internal and external goods was sufficiently delineated. To recap, it was noted that there are two types of internal goods, excellence of the products and excellence of the pursuit of the practice. External goods, on the other hand, refer to all other kinds of objects of pursuit which may in fact be achieved by a practice, but which do not directly refer to excellence. "Internal goods consist in excellent performance, great ability, or even in the pursuit of the practice itself, but external goods consist in things and achievements."¹⁷¹ Winning, in the light of this distinction, is not an internal good of athletic competition, but rather an external good; this is not to deny of course, that the excellence and ability with which the athlete competes – internal goods – will often obtain the external good of victory, but even one who happens to lose may still have achieved a high degree of excellence in the practice.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. S. FELDMAN, "Objectivity, Pluralism, and Relativism: A Critique of MacIntyre's Theory of Virtue", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1986), 311.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*..., 199, 200.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*..., 95, 96.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

As far as the objections mentioned above are concerned, the important thing to note here is the aspect of excellence which is an essential characteristic of the internal goods of a practice. This reveals the fact that virtues are required both for the achievement of these internal goods and for the progress of the practice. “To excel in a practice entails becoming a more virtuous person.”¹⁷² This is what enables one to distinguish what legitimately qualifies as a practice – it must be an activity in which internal goods have a central role, and thus the objection of Hauerwas and Wadell is in large part resolved. It is true that the determination of practices that MacIntyre makes in *After Virtue* seems arbitrary:

Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music. In the ancient and medieval worlds the creation and sustaining of human communities – of households, cities, nations – is generally taken to be a practice in the sense in which I have defined it.¹⁷³

Yet, once the crucial aspect of internal goods is clarified, one can see how this becomes the deciding factor as to what legitimately qualifies as a practice. This is not to rule out discrepancy as to what constitutes an internal good; there is room for a certain amount of debate, but, as seen above, internal goods are those which directly regard excellence of both the products and engagement in a practice.

The last objection which concerns the possibility of evil practices arises as a consequence of MacIntyre’s rejection of Aquinas’ theory of the unity of the virtues. J. Porter brings to attention that while Aquinas’ proposal was widely accepted in his time, it is just as widely dismissed today as it seems rather counter-intuitive. Porter argues, however, that Aquinas’ theory is more complex than it seems at first sight, and that, when reappraised in the light of Aquinas’ theory of human action, offers valuable insights to problems raised by renewed interest in virtue theory.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 97.

¹⁷³ A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 187, 188.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. J. PORTER, “The Unity of the Virtues and the Ambiguity of Goodness: A Reappraisal of Aquinas’ Theory of the Virtues”, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1993), 139-145.

Lutz follows this line of thought when he says, “For Aquinas, the unity of virtue is not an arbitrary dogma; it is a conclusion drawn from observations about a kind of excellence in human agency that makes a person a good candidate for the leadership and management of a community.”¹⁷⁵

Aquinas follows the standard scholastic tradition regarding the connection of the four cardinal virtues of justice, fortitude, temperance and prudence. Of these four, prudence holds the central place. J. Pieper calls prudence the “mold and ‘mother’ of all the other cardinal virtues.”¹⁷⁶ He adds, “In other words, none but the prudent man can be just, brave and temperate, and the good man is good in so far as he is prudent.”¹⁷⁷ Lutz emphasizes this connection as well when he says, “According to the doctrine of the unity virtues, prudence without the moral virtues would be incapable of action, while the moral virtues without prudence would lose their substantive content.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, there is a clear relation between not only the cardinal virtues, but between the virtues and good human action – prudence being a “reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods”¹⁷⁹, and the other virtues enabling man to act consistently according to the right judgment of prudence.

Lutz makes an insightful distinction, showing how that, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre focuses on a formal, procedural definition of virtues as opposed to a substantive definition which develops the specific content of each virtue. The case is different with Aquinas and Aristotle, where every attempt to give a substantive explanation of the virtues, demands a direct relation to prudence, and thus on a theory of the unity of the virtues. Yet, herein lies the inconsistency of MacIntyre, since the formal definition implies a substantive definition and thus also implies the unity of the virtues which MacIntyre outrightly accepts in chapter twelve of *After*

¹⁷⁵ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 162.

¹⁷⁶ J. PIEPER, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1966, 3.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 161.

¹⁷⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.5 [1140b5].

Virtue, only to explicitly criticize it in chapter thirteen.¹⁸⁰ The consequence of this rejection is that virtue remains fundamentally without content; the virtues would remain purely formal. As Lutz comments, “The problem with *After Virtue*’s rejection of Aquinas’s unity of the virtues [...] is that it makes it impossible to specify what kinds of actions could be described as ‘virtuous’ in any objective manner.”¹⁸¹

Whether or not MacIntyre’s reasons for rejecting Aquinas’ theory are justified is beyond our present scope, yet it seems that he dismisses Aquinas’ reasoning with an overly broad stroke.¹⁸² Without this resource, he is forced to find a solution to the problem of virtues situated in and partially defined by intrinsically evil practices. His answer to this objection is that even if there were practices in themselves evil, a proposition about which he is doubtful (torture, he believes, would not fit into his definition of a genuine practice), it does not follow that whatever proceeds from a particular virtue is necessarily right. Thus the claim that virtues are partially defined by practice does not entail that all practices must be condoned. Practices carried out in particular times and places are not immune to moral criticism. Virtue, as MacIntyre notes, may itself be appealed to in order to criticize a practice.¹⁸³ D’Andrea points out that this argument is circular since virtues, defined by practice, are that which provide us with the criteria of judging a practice. He also suggests that MacIntyre has not yet considered deeply enough how Aristotle and Aquinas derive their virtues; consequently, only the uniformed would think MacIntyre’s derivation superior to that of his predecessors.¹⁸⁴

Lutz provides a further reason for the exclusion of the possibility of evil practices. When one considers the Aristotelian notion of evil, good and evil are distinguished on the basis of desire, that is, they are practical, and through proper formation of practical judgment, one learns to discern what is noble, pleasurable,

¹⁸⁰ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue”*, 160.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁸² Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue...*, 178, 179.

¹⁸³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. T.D. D’ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 272, 273.

and just, and distinguish these from what is base, a cause of injury, and painful. If evil is understood in this way, it is impossible that an evil practice fit into MacIntyre's definition of a practice which of its very essence seeks internal goods. If evil were to be understood in an arbitrary or voluntarist way, one could make a case for evil practices, but this would be against the fundamental direction of MacIntyre's thought which looks to the conditions of human agency for the content of the virtues and the foundation of ethics.¹⁸⁵

C. Developments of the After Virtue project

MacIntyre's theory as proposed in *After Virtue* is far from complete. Taking into account the various criticisms to his proposal, he continued to develop his thought into what would become known as the *After Virtue* project. This dissertation will be limited to exposing three key developments that help to give a more complete answer to the objections that have been treated. The following questions will guide the exposition: how does MacIntyre respond to the charge of relativism that was mentioned in section two above; how does he reconsider the consequences of rejecting Aquinas' theory of the virtues; how does he achieve a greater synthesis with Aristotle's theory by emphasizing the importance of biology?

1. A response to relativism

Moral relativism, as Lutz defines it, is "the position that objective truth in moral matters is an empty category because truth claims about virtue, appropriateness, right, and justice always depend on some limited view of the world."¹⁸⁶ This argument clearly penetrates the heart of MacIntyre's proposal, and if not adequately rebuked, would constitute a coup de grace; the principal attempt of MacIntyre to find an answer to the problem of moral incommensurability would legitimately be pronounced a dead end. The argument against MacIntyre follows in synthesis: if practice and tradition are socially and historically conditioned, and

¹⁸⁵ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Reading Alasdair MacIntyre's "After Virtue"*, 164, 165.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 176.

virtue is embedded within practice, which is in turn embedded in a tradition, both of which are fruits of particular cultures, virtue must as a consequence be relative, as must the ethical tradition to which it belongs. In this line, J. Haldane has declared that a normative moral theory in MacIntyre's terms has no force outside of the particular community in which it finds its place.¹⁸⁷

The problem is both complex and central. MacIntyre comments, "Any contemporary philosophy which does not find this problem inescapable and central must be gravely defective."¹⁹¹ This paper seeks to analyze MacIntyre's response from a strictly chronological angle, that is, an analysis of MacIntyre's thought regarding the charge of relativism which constitutes a development that takes a definite course from *After Virtue* until some of his most recent essays published in the volume *The Tasks of Philosophy*.¹⁹² What are the principal elements that MacIntyre adds at each stage to offer an integral response?

In *After Virtue*, one finds the first decisive piece of the puzzle; MacIntyre claims that rationality itself is a practice, thus accounting for the many forms of rationality in different cultures. Lutz points out two implications of this declaration, showing how MacIntyre escapes the charge of relativism. First, there is a certain degree of apparent relativism that is part and parcel of the human condition. Second, if rationality is indeed a practice, this would imply that it can be improved and developed, and that some forms of rationality would be better or worse on the basis of their ability to assess the truth and falsity of human judgments.¹⁹³ These intuitions, though not in themselves sufficient, do offer the basis for the subsequent steps in the argument.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. J. HALDANE, "MacIntyre's Thomist Revival: What Next?", in J. HORTON - S. MENDUS (eds.), *After MacIntyre...*, 96-99.

¹⁹¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, "A Partial Response to my Critics", in J. HORTON - S. MENDUS (eds.), *After MacIntyre...*, 295.

¹⁹² IDEM, *The Tasks of Philosophy, Selected Essays, Volume I*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

¹⁹³ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 43.

The second piece of the solution is presented in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* in the context of the conflict between two incompatible traditions, neither of which in themselves vouch for moral relativism, but make definite truth claims. Here, MacIntyre compliments his understanding of rationality as a practice with his idea of a best-yet formulation of a rational tradition. He offers nothing short of a dialectic proposal in order to resolve the conflicts of rational traditions on the basis of rational superiority. In the event of a clash of two cultures which speak completely different languages, with two completely different worldviews, relativism would become a serious temptation for anyone who inhabited one of these conflicting cultures. How can one worldview be justified before another incompatible worldview? On the one hand, there seem to be moral truths binding on all rational persons; on the other hand, in another tradition, these truths are not held as reasonable.

Three possible solutions result: impose one's opinions on others by force; establish a neutral culture or neutral standpoint; or establish grounds for objective rational superiority via a dialectic engagement. Declaring the first two options to be inadequate, MacIntyre proceeds to provide a framework of a dialectic engagement within a clash of traditions. The first requirement is that each tradition should seek to understand the other as if it were a second language, that is, on the basis of its own criteria and methods. Only then, in second stage, does what I call a reciprocal illumination occur, that is, roadblocks and problems in both traditions receive light from the methods and criteria of the opposite tradition. In other words, certain elements may aid one in solving the inconsistencies or limits of his own tradition, or even, in the most radical case, move one to leave behind his own tradition in the face of a better, more accurate tradition. In this process, one makes progress toward a best-yet formulation. Thus, MacIntyre does indeed make a significant step in his theory. Rationality is a fundamental practice which moves toward a best-yet formulation of the truth, even if never reaching a complete and perfect formulation.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 349-388.

D'Andrea points out a key distinction that lies at the heart of this step in MacIntyre's theory, that is, between rational moral persuasion and moral truth. Though there are, in fact, truths which hold for human nature as such, this does not mean that all have grasped these truths or have been effectively persuaded by them. Traditions aspire to universality, but universal truths must be corroborated and integrated into a rationally convincing argument.¹⁹⁷

The Tasks of Philosophy, a collection of MacIntyre's articles, offers the final pieces of his comprehensive solution. The central contribution is found in the 1994 essay, titled *Moral Relativism; Truth and Justification*²⁰¹, which has the principal aim of pinpointing the role which the claim of truth holds in moral discourse and moral enquiry. MacIntyre's fundamental claim is that "all rational justification of particular moral standpoints is [...] internal to those standpoints, and an elucidation of the claim to truth universally or almost universally advanced – implicitly or explicitly – by the protagonists of each of those standpoints."²⁰² His main point is that any claim which appeals to rational justification as such is fundamentally appealing to a mode of rational justification which necessarily transcends the limits of a given standpoint.²⁰³

MacIntyre begins by offering three reasons for distinguishing truth from rational justification: first, the an idealized form of rational justification has never been adequately formulated, and later revisions of one's mistakes does not negate that at a given moment one was justified in making such a claim; second, each standpoint appeals to principles specific to it, such that any ideal system of rational justification would necessarily be standpoint based; third, rational justification is actually understood in the service of truth, that is, as a means for discovering the truth as *telos* of an enquiry. Thus, progress in an enquiry is made when it can explain how things really are, and not just how they seem from a particular angle.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁷ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 404.

²⁰¹ A.C. MACINTYRE, "Moral Relativism; Truth and Justification", in *The Tasks of Philosophy...*, 52-73.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁰³ Cf. *Ibid*

²⁰⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 56-58.

MacIntyre relies heavily on P. Geach's argument of assertion, whereby one who makes an assertion is committing himself to certain other claims, and that the notion of assertion cannot be explained independently of truth.²⁰⁵ In this view, in any assertion of truth, a substantive conception of truth is at least implicit. Thus, whenever one makes a claim about truth, he is also vouching for its rational justification. Anyone who asserts the truth of a moral account is, at least implicitly, committed to holding that his account is not limited to a particular point of view; contradictory rival positions, on the other hand, would be held as false and able to be replaced by a rationally superior account. Naturally, then, one must also hold that in the case his own account were shown to be defective in some way, it too could be replaced by a superior account. Thus, based on the implications of a claim to moral truth, MacIntyre explains the phenomenon of rival moral traditions, and shows that such disagreement can only occur, and be ultimately resolved, when there is a concept of truth which transcends the limitations of a particular tradition. MacIntyre states, "It is only insofar as the claims of any one such tradition are framed in terms of a conception of truth which is more and other than that of some conception of rational acceptability or justification that rival moral standpoints can be understood as logically incompatible."²⁰⁶

Yet, this claim to truth is precisely what the relativist denies, claiming that rival traditions only claim truth from their given perspective, and that no one tradition can be said to be rationally superior to another. Yet, what the relativist overlooks is that in any truth claim from a particular point of view, an implied claim is already being made as to what is in fact the case, that is, from this vantage point, things seem to be this way.²⁰⁷

Second, the moral relativist attempts to pass a judgment on moral and practical claims that people in particular cultures live by and hold as actually true.

²⁰⁵ Cf. P. GEACH, "Assertion", *The Philosophical Review*, 74 (1965), 449-465.

²⁰⁶ A.C. MACINTYRE, "Moral Relativism; Truth and Justification", 60.

²⁰⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 68, 69.

In other words, the members of every moral culture have rejected moral relativism by the very shaping of their lives around what they hold as actually true, thus casting doubt on all theoretical claims to moral relativism.²⁰⁸

D'Andrea remarks that it is clear from the beginning that MacIntyre rejects the possibility of a final, rationally justified moral relativism due to the rational dynamic inherent in the very attempts to justify just such a relativism; in fact, relativist theories follow the same dynamic of moral traditions which are subject to a continuous development, a process which seeks to offer more adequate explanations as new problems arise, often requiring radical revision. "This MacIntyre thinks is enough to show that in moral and in other matters, the human mind, including in its social consolidation in a community of enquiry or an intellectual tradition, is governed by objects external to itself."²⁰⁹

MacIntyre ultimately evidences an underlying quest for the truth in all moral discourse and enquiry; truth, in other words, is the *telos* of rational enquiry. In this light, he returns to the theme of rationality as a practice embedded within a tradition which, though dialectic engagement, may claim rational superiority. Now, however, the precise criteria has been made explicit, that is, the concept of truth, the *telos* of rationality, present in all moral discourse and enquiry, and, in consequence, certain standards of rationality become clear. Thus, the *telos* of truth orders and structures of the practice of rationality. Of course, this does not entail that those who hold the rival positions will readily agree or admit the validity of an argument against them or even that all will abide to such standards of rational justification. MacIntyre says:

The terms in which that explanation is framed may well remain inaccessible to most and perhaps all continuing adherents of that rival standpoint. So on fundamental matters, moral or philosophical, the existence of continuing disagreement, even between highly intelligent people, should not lead us to suppose that there are not adequate resources available for the rational resolution of such disagreement.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *The Tasks of Philosophy...*, ix.

²⁰⁹ T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 404.

²¹² Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, "Moral Relativism; Truth and Justification", 73.

The fruit of a theory of practical rationality, in this light, is to give one a rationally credible standpoint, where one is convinced of the truth of his position, but also open to revisions and developments to resolve new problems and incoherencies. This is only possible because a conception of substantive truth is implied in the very activity of theoretical enquiry. Thus, though an impasse between rival traditions does occur, this is not a reason to make relativist conclusions. Each tradition, having its own standards of rational justification, is open to dialectic engagement by which one tradition may be enriched, and disagreements, if not completely resolved, at least be explained.²²¹

In summary, a chronological analysis of MacIntyre's comprehensive response to the charge of relativism consists of three main developments which are a type of crescendo. He begins by constituting rationality itself as practice, then proceeds to show how progress is made particularly through dialectical engagement with rival traditions. This dialectic reveals truth as *telos* which implies basic criteria of rational superiority based on the best-yet approximation to this goal. Lastly, any truth claim from a limited, particular standpoint, implies a claim to a substantive conception of truth and rational justification that necessarily transcends the limits of that standpoint, thus making relativism, moral or otherwise, untenable.

2. *Rethinking the unity of the virtues*

The second development of the *After Virtue* project is a reformulation due to an ever-growing acceptance of key aspects of Aquinas' tradition; in fact, the main topic of *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* is to propose that Aquinas' proposal is the best-yet formulation of the classical-Christian tradition. As far as the concept of practice is concerned, the most significant development is the result of MacIntyre's acceptance of a theory of the unity of the virtues, a point that was mentioned above. The explicit reversal of his proposal made in *After Virtue* finds its place in the preface to *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* where MacIntyre says,

²²¹ Cf. T.D. D'ANDREA, *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue...*, 406.

“I now [...] think that my earlier criticism of Aquinas’ theses on the unity of virtue was simply mistaken and due in part to a misreading of Aquinas.”²²² As Lutz points out, this is a potent asset added to the arsenal of MacIntyre’s proposal, making it possible to overcome any relativism with regard to the virtues and to reject the possibility of evil practices. Real virtues are now given objective content and can be distinguished from apparent virtues.²²³

Clearly, evil practices are no longer tenable since practices are in the service of internal goods. Any apparently internal goods of an evil practice would not be real goods and thus not objects of pursuit *per se*.²²⁴ When the virtues are united as Aquinas proposed, one cannot truly possess courage while lacking prudence, which enables one to judge the proper moment and the proper manner to be courageous. In this sense, one cannot sustain that Hitler, for example, was courageous; he fundamentally lacked right judgment of what the moral good was and, consequently, how to act to achieve it. Any actions that may have seemed brave or valiant, were actually depraved. Thus the unity of virtues cannot sustain an evil practice.

Lutz also comments on the connection between theory and reality that the unity of the virtues establishes. In every human enquiry there is indeed an aspect of relativity that must be accounted for; this degree of relativism actually accounts for false theories of virtue that have been manifest throughout history in diverse cultures. Yet, to conclude that relativism, on this basis, is the ultimate conclusion of morality is incorrect. Virtues cannot support false practices, and neither can true practices support false virtues. What needs to be shown is how false virtue theories lead to digression and frustration in cultures that adopt them. Ultimately, the validity of practices, which may differ from culture to culture, need to be measured up against the objectivity of the real world; theory is measured by the reality. This

²²² A.C. MACINTYRE, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, x.

²²³ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre...*, 102.

²²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

is a truly Aristotelian conclusion where the measure of virtue is the wise and prudent man.²²⁵

3. *Reformulation regarding biology*

The final development concerns MacIntyre's reformulation on the grounds of the importance of biology which is the subject of *Dependent Rational Animals*, gathered from the 1999 Carus Lectures. While in *After Virtue* he heavily criticized Aristotle's metaphysical biology, in these lectures he recognizes the importance of a solid biological basis for virtue theory. This is not to say that he naively accepts outdated Aristotelian science, but rather that he values the fundamental intuition of Aristotle who gave tremendous importance to observation of living beings, making it the basis of his theory. Theory, in other words, needs to correspond with the reality of experience. Neither is MacIntyre proposing a metaphysical basis for his theory as Aristotle notably did; he simply is seeking to show that the animal nature of man offers invaluable resources to an integral understanding of man. This leads him to address two fundamental questions: what do human beings have in common with other intelligent animals, and what consequences does this have for moral philosophy?²²⁶

By answering the above questions, MacIntyre desires to bring important and often neglected characteristics of the human condition to attention. Modern moral theory typically reserves its reflections to a fully developed rational individual, but being an independent and healthy adult is only one stage in the life of man; one must also consider the radical dependence and vulnerability of man in infancy, illness, and in old age. Moral theory must take into consideration "the facts of vulnerability and affliction and the related facts of dependence as central to the human condition."²²⁷

²²⁵ Cf. C.S. LUTZ, 103, 104.

²²⁶ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals...*, ix.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

Overall, these reflections amplify both MacIntyre's vision of man and his account of the virtues. He evidences the importance of becoming an independent practical reasoner through the virtues of acknowledged dependence. There is something of a paradox here; man seeks to become independent while remaining at the same time dependent. Yet, this is an attempt at giving morality a vision of the whole man, from conception to death. From conception through childhood, man is deeply dependent on others for his development, but progressively working towards becoming an independent practical reasoner. Having achieved his state of independence, he has the dual task of helping others who depend on him to properly develop into independent practical reasoners and to sustain and care for those who have lost their independence through sickness and old age. Once his own independence is debilitated, this man too will rely on the care and concern of others.²²⁸

In summary, three fundamental developments to MacIntyre's *After Virtue* project have been seen which give a more complete understanding of virtue in practice, thus enabling an adequate response to pertinent objections. First, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre elucidated the idea of rationality as a practice and sought to separate himself from any hints of relativism. Second, by an acceptance of Aquinas' theory of unity of the virtues, MacIntyre effectively resolves inconsistencies present in *After Virtue*, particularly those regarding the content of the virtues and the possibility of vicious practices. Lastly, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre recognizes the importance of human biology in gaining an integral vision of man which takes into account his vulnerability and dependence on others. This allows for an amplification and more complete formulation of his virtue theory.

D. A proposal for future directions

After having made an in-depth examination of MacIntyre's proposal of virtue in practice, two fundamental points stand out as a possible way ahead. First, there

²²⁸ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals...*, 119–129.

is the possibility and the need to give MacIntyre's theory a solid metaphysical foundation, already implicit in Aristotle and Aquinas. Second, taking inspiration from MacIntyre's reflections on the virtues of acknowledged dependence, one can offer a promising arguments in applied ethics regarding care for the elderly and the protection of the human person while still in the womb. No more than a brief mention of these possibilities will be made here.

Though MacIntyre's theory has been shown to stand on its own without an explicit metaphysical explanation, and in fact may be valued as a tool for dialogue with contemporary moral theorists for just this reason, this does not preclude the possibility and necessity of offering his proposal a solid metaphysical foundation. In fact, by ascribing to the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition, there is already an implied metaphysics, but this ought to be developed. Of particular interest is how a metaphysics of human action could offer the theoretical tools to take into account the socio-historical aspects of practices and traditions in which the virtues find their place. In this line, Thomists such as C. Fabro have made compelling explorations into a metaphysics of human action based on the emergence of being as the act of all acts and therefore the perfection of all perfections, including human actions and operations. This offers a fixed, absolute foundation of human action which at the same time explains the diverse conditions of human acting, such as language, culture, sexuality, and economics. A. Contat, in his article *Esse, essentia, ordo*, offers a marvelous synthesis of this position which could serve as a base for finding connections to MacIntyre's proposal.²²⁹

The second line of development responds to polemical issues in the field of bioethics, not to mention in public debate and politics. Attempts to find arguments that convince opposing positions often end in stagnation – here again the problem of incommensurability. MacIntyre's overall virtue theory, with the added dimension of virtues of acknowledged dependence, offers a direction toward a solution which finds its basis on an integral anthropology. MacIntyre, in fact, hints

²²⁹ Cf. A. CONTAT, "Esse, essentia, ordo. Verso una metafisica della partecipazione operativa", *Espíritu*, LXI (2012), 9-71.

at such solutions, showing how an understanding of human dependence and vulnerability redefine human relationships, for example, in a family, where the parents care for and educate the children, only to be later cared for by their children during senescence.²³⁰ As is the case in a family, so also in the larger community to which one belongs. Dependence and vulnerability make one a participant in relationships of giving and receiving where each person stands in a dual relationship with the other. Even the disabled and handicapped, for example, participate in these relationships since they receive care and sympathy from others and at the same time teach others to give without expectation of return, which is the hallmark of virtue. Deeper reflections along these lines will prove to be invaluable in creating true communities where virtue reigns.

²³⁰ Cf. A.C. MACINTYRE, *Dependent Rational Animals...*, 103, 104.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this dissertation has been to delve into the concept of practice within the whole context of MacIntyre's original and compelling proposal made in *After Virtue*.

The overarching argument began with a conceptual analysis of practice which both sought to understand the problem that MacIntyre seeks to solve, and to which practice is a response, and to examine the historical and philosophical sources that MacIntyre draws from in developing the concept of practice.

The second stage explored the nature of practice as proposed in *After Virtue* which is a masterful synthesis of MacIntyre's early thought. MacIntyre seeks to give conceptual unity to the tradition of virtues as a response to the failure of the Enlightenment and the consequent fragmentation of moral concepts. Virtue is thus defined in three logically inter-related stages. Practice is the primary locus of virtue, itself embedded in the narrative unity of a human life and in a moral tradition.

The purpose of the third stage was both to evidence a number of key objections to MacIntyre's proposal, particularly in reference to practice, and to give an adequate response. MacIntyre himself provides many of these responses, either in *After Virtue* or in the development of the *After Virtue* project. Other responses have been suggested by experts in MacIntyre's thought such as D'Andrea and Lutz.

I have also offered a brief suggestion as to future directions that the *After Virtue* project might take as a step towards a more solid foundation on the one hand, and towards a much needed application on the other. The overall hope is that this work has offered a compelling synthesis of some of MacIntyre's profound insights regarding virtue in practice, as well as a valid proposal for further reflection on MacIntyre.

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